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"Passage"

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We have two new members to the Deep Magic staff: one new member and one returning member. Welcome to Mike Loos and hello again to Joel Brown! We would also like to say goodbye to Scott Clements, who is leaving to pursue other interests. Good luck, Scott, and thanks for all you've done!

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A subscription to Deep Magic is absolutely free. Each month, we will notify you when a new issue is released. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers. Go to the website and subscribe today.

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please let us know, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

November 2004

Greetings to all our readers as the holiday season is at hand for many of us. For those of you in the United States, November brings a time of thankfulness. We at Deep Magic have enjoyed a wonderful year and would like share some of our gratitude with you.

This year, we have enjoyed the many excellent submissions we have received, only a portion of which make it to the e-zine. The vast majority of our submissions come from our regular readers. Thanks to an active bulletin board, we feel like we have gotten to know many of you much more personally. Our editorial staff has grown over the past year with many talented people volunteering their time and abilities to keep the magic flowing. We've said a few goodbyes to editors who have moved on to other challenges this year, and we would like to remind all of those who have worked on or contributed to Deep Magic how thankful we are for your efforts and for sharing the fruits of your labor with us. The labor of our editors have enabled us to grow, evolve, and improve the technical production, quality, and variety of offerings in Deep Magic and on the website.

We are thankful for the financial donations that have kept this venture's head above water and have enabled us to become a non-profit company.

We are thankful for all the contributions that have allowed us to open our shared world, Kenatos to the Deep Magic family. We are anxious to see this project grow in the years to come.

We are thankful that we have been able to compile an impressive book reviews section in the e-zine to share recommendations, insights, and warnings about fiction with our readers and friends.

We are thankful to the authors of our novels and stories that have agreed to terms of print publishing. We look forward to seeing *Deeper Magic, The Second Collection*, our second anthology of short stories and *Silverkin*, by Jeff Wheeler, the sequel to *Landmoor*, in print this month.

In this, our 30th Issue, we offer sample chapters of *Silverkin* to the fans of *Landmoor*, who have anxiously awaited the continuation of Mr. Wheeler's excellent fantasy series. We also offer three exceptional fantasy short stories and one outstanding science fiction short story to scratch your itch for fiction. We are also pleased to present a selection of amazing artwork, including this month's cover, and an interview with twenty-one-year-old artist, Jonas Jakobsson. If you have a few minutes, and have not yet done so, we invite you to complete a brief survey you will find linked on page 4. You may also note the writing challenge entries for October's writing challenge are to be published in December. This change of format will allow you more time to deliver your submissions in the future and allow the staff more time to complete production of the e-zine each month.

So open the issue, enjoy our offerings, and express your thanks to the authors who work so hard to entertain, enlighten and expand our minds.

Thanks again for reading Deep Magic.

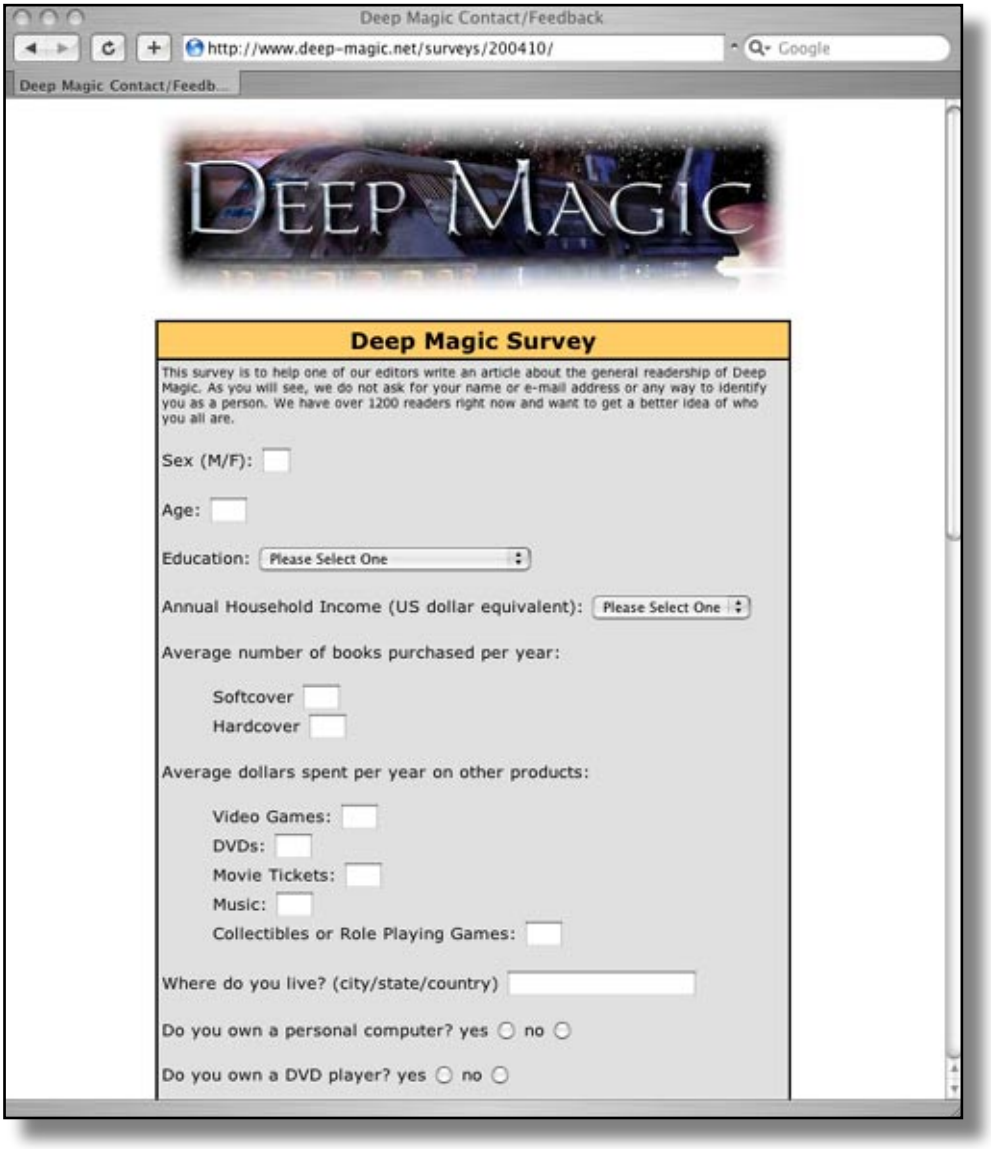
All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Deep Magic Reader Survey

One of the editors of Deep Magic would like your input for an article. You read Deep Magic because you enjoy fantasy and science fiction. But what makes a person try out a new author, or stay with that author novel after novel? There are so many new books that come out, one cannot possibly keep track of it all. So how do you do it?

There are a growing number of subscribers to Deep Magic. We would like you to fill out a brief survey to help us get to know you better—anonymously anyway. We won't ask for your name or e-mail address or any way to identify you with a response. The survey results will only be used for some statistical analysis for the purpose of the article which will be published in December's issue. We welcome your participation by clicking here. It should take no more than five minutes.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Deep Magic Survey
This survey is to help one of our editors write an article about the general readership of Deep Magic. As you will see, we do not ask for your name or e-mail address or any way to identify you as a person. We have over 1200 readers right now and want to get a better idea of who you all are.
Sex (M/F):
Age:
Education: Please Select One
Annual Household Income (US dollar equivalent): Please Select One
Average number of books purchased per year:
Softcover
Hardcover
Average dollars spent per year on other products:
Video Games:
DVDs:
Movie Tickets:
Music:
Collectibles or Role Playing Games:
Where do you live? (city/state/country)
Do you own a personal computer? yes no
Do you own a DVD player? yes no

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication.

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. **We have a new due date for Writing Challenge submissions!** They will be printed one month later, and you have longer to submit them. Please note the deadline date below.

November 2004 Writing Challenge
Entries due December 10, 2004

What gives a character depth? Some say it is conflict, others tension. A character is more than simple descriptions and mannerisms. To understand characters, we must see how their desires shape their lives. For this month's challenge, we would like you to invent a scene with a strong character. A good guy or bad guy, a good girl or bad girl, a throw-away character in a tavern, or the future hero of the next epic saga. You do not have to write a full story, but you can if inspired. Just write a scene where you can develop your character as best as you can. Develop this character by asking yourself these questions:

1. What does this character want?
2. What are his/her motives for wanting this?
3. How do we (the readers) learn what the character wants (dialogue, action, interior thoughts)?
4. What stands in the way of him/her achieving it?
5. What does that desire set in motion?

If you don't know the answers to these questions, the character will probably be rather shallow. The setting, of course, should be fantasy or science fiction.

Selections from the October 2004 Writing Challenge

Because of our new timeline for writing challenge submissions, the October entries will be published in the December issue of Deep Magic.

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from October issue (entries due by Nov 10):

With the holiday season approaching, it's time to turn our attention with the Kenatos project to the holidays and traditions that will fill the world. So that's the challenge this month. Create a holiday/tradition for Kenatos. This holiday/tradition can center around the end of the year, beginning of the year, summer/autumn solstice, midwinter...whenever you'd like. It can be a religious holiday or an annual secular event. Give us detail and make your entry rich with flavor. Provide the history, or myth, surrounding the holiday or tradition. Don't forget, too, about the new writing challenge timeline. You have until Nov 10, nearly six weeks, to get your entry to us. (Yes, that is a firm deadline.) Every entry we publish in the December issue will be an official part of the Kenatos world.

Dueling Wizards

By Jeremy Yoder

Barille paused in his ascent of the long, narrow path leading to Dorin's tower. Looking out over the wide expanse far below the mountain, he could almost hear Dorin now: *Why don't you just teleport like any sane wizard?*

He shook his head, unable to fault his friend, since Dorin was relatively young at the age of two hundred fifty-six and still learning the craft. Eventually, Dorin would understand that life's inconveniences and problems couldn't—or shouldn't—be willed away with a wave of a hand or a well-placed incantation.

Barille also knew he had little room to criticize since he had been exactly the same only a few short decades ago. But now, as he gazed out over the orange-tinted horizon, breathing the moist, morning air, he could hardly remember those times.

Except for the record-keepers of old who claim to have communed with them, what guarantees do we have that they ever existed? And if so, who made them?

A cry from above jolted him out of his trance. Zo, Dorin's ever-watchful eagle, scanned the realm. It made him think of Tybra, his own familiar who had wanted to come, but gryphons weren't narrow enough to walk up such winding mountain paths, and it wasn't his fault Tybra had injured his wing. Dorin had warned him about pestering the valley unicorns, so it only served him right when one of them retaliated.

As Zo disappeared over the upper ridge to alert his master of an approaching guest, Barille resumed his walk. Today he finally felt like sharing with his old friend what had been gnawing at him these past few years, although he could almost guess what the reaction would be.

* * *

"… however, when Ferdinand—the Third, mind you, not the Second—told me in front of all the delegates *and* his father that I could just as well employ my services elsewhere, I said, 'You know, I believe I'll do that!'" Dorin paused to sip his Malean tea as he continued to levitate in a seated position. "And let me tell you, as I stood and began drawing my robe about me, you should have seen the horror on their faces! I doubt that even a rabid manticore could have caused them more of a fright!"

Dorin followed up with his twittering laugh, which for some reason Barille had yet to become annoyed with. Barille simply nodded while trying to appear interested.

"Come now," Dorin said. He set his cup to one side where it likewise floated. "There's something troubling you and I insist that you share before you forget it. Or worse, before you completely fail to feign interest in my ramblings."

Barille smiled. "That obvious?" He inhaled deeply and took a sip of his own tea while also levitating in a cross-legged position.

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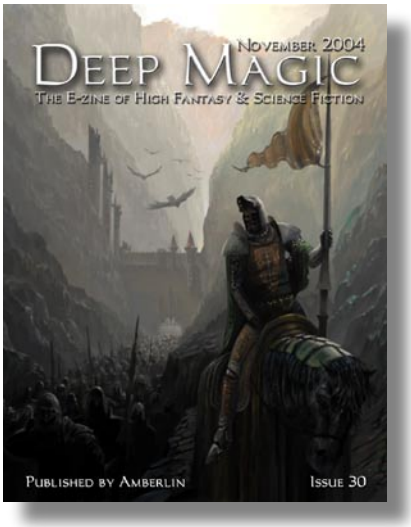
Featured Artist
Jonas Jakobsson



Age: 21
Residence: Sweden, Gotland
Hobbies: Digital painting, 2d-animation, movies, friends
Favorite Book or Author: I gotta say here that Tolkien must be the author I admire most for his creativity he had when writing LOTR.
Started Painting In: I was drawing a lot as a kid but pretty much stopped when I was 12. Last year I discovered digital painting. So 2003 was my starting year.
Artist Most Inspired By: Craig Mullins
Media You Work In: Only digital, but some day I will try out traditional also. There is something special with real paintings also. I don't know which is that hardest or which is the best to work in. I think it comes down to what you are used to.
Schools Attended: I have not any real painting education, only Media program school (age 16-18) And after that a small course in webdesign at a university in Sweden. Nothing much so far, but this year I am going to a 2d animation school for 2 years.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Since I am pretty new in the business, I have not any published work yet. On the internet my works can be found in my epilogue gallery, yonaz.epilogue.net. For my full gallery you can head over to yonaz.deviantart.com
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: The easiest way is through my email: jakobsson-jonas@telia.com. For buying my art you can go to yonaz.deviantart.com where I have my prints available for purchase.

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: Already as a kid one of my favourite hobbies was to draw. I was up at 7 in the morning to draw. Then for some reason I stopped when I was around 12. Last year I got the crazy idea to try and draw something in photoshop, I had used photoshop a lot before and I knew, of course, about the brush tool, but I never really used it. But I thought why have a brush tool in the program if it is not meant that one should draw with it! I did not know anything about the digital painting business at all, I did not even

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know if it was really possible to make something look nice in photoshop. Everything was new to me, but anyway there I started and I could recognize my own style which I left off 8 years earlier when I was 12. But during these 1-2 years I feel I have learned A LOT.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I am trying to paint as realistically as possible, I realize though that at the moment I am pretty far from that goal. But I am sure I will get there one day; my strong side is that I learn very quickly. Most of my work is fantasy or sci-fi. Another thing about my pictures is that because I try to really work them through carefully as much as I can, they often end up with a high level of detail.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: I have found a lot of inspiration from Craig Mullins' skills, which I admire alot. And also from some of the very good artists on deviantart.com and, lately, on epilogue. Other than that I can find inspiration from pretty much anything; I study alot of things that I see when I am outside or wherever I am.

Q: What inspired this piece (this month's cover image)?
A: I saw a picture in Mullins' gallery where he had painted these wonderful mountains. So the idea came from there, and the knights and passage gate came in later in the process, because it looked boring with just mountains.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Mullins, Linda Bergkvist, and a big number of other artists and all the digital paintings I have seen and studied.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Both the words 'success' and 'career' feel wrong in my ears to me since I am a newcomer, but I was really happy when I got my first paid comission.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: I feel that there is a lot more creativity in the sci-fi genre than in the fantasy. In sci-fi it is much more common with new ideas and concepts. I think in fantasy people should get outside LOTR a little more. I would wanna see more fantasy books and movies with other characters, species, and environments then just orchs, elfs and everything that already exists in LOTR.

Interview in VR

By Darrell Newton

Chin Shu Industries' Remote VR Site in Warren, New Jersey

Tom Hackett felt sweat trickle from under his arms as he opened the door to his third interview in a week. He had to make this one work. His savings had moved from respectable to cautious, and now his job prospects were running thin. Even his wife, who had married him for his brain and not for his looks, had made hints of moving back in with her parents. Tom respected her parents, but making that move would be admitting his failure as a husband and father.

He saw a straight-backed chair with no padding in front of a large, teak desk with a computer display facing away from him. He assumed it was where he was supposed to sit. There was a plush leather chair on the other side of the desk. No, that wouldn't be for him. It would be for Dr. Washington, the interviewer for Chin Shu Industries. He sat in the straight-backed chair and analyzed the room.

The large office didn't offer much to keep his mind busy. Sparsely furnished in a post-modern flavor, it gave him the feeling of efficiency mixed with opulence. Expansive windows behind the desk looked down onto the city below. To his left, technical books lined shelves, interspersed with what he supposed were small scale versions of Chin Shu robots. Were they working models? He was tempted to see if they were. But what if someone came in while he was looking at them? Would they think him rude, or expect prying curiosity from an engineer? Prudence prevailed and he remained seated. He counted the number of holographic projectors, speakers, microphones and cameras along the wall and ceiling. It was a sophisticated setup for virtual reality or VR. They were unobtrusive and would probably be missed by anyone not in the VR profession—but not by Tom. He was impressed.

Tom resisted the urge to shake the woman's hand. He wouldn't have anything to grab on to anyway since the image of the woman was just projected and not really there.

He glanced at his watch. Only two minutes had passed. He glanced at the cameras. Were they watching him now? He disliked interviews, especially ones done in VR. They served a purpose; it could be recorded—that didn't bother him since everything was recorded anyway—and it cut down on the need for travel. But even though he hated flying, VR had always seemed like a cheat to him. The more realistic they tried making it, the more it reminded him that it wasn't real. What did he mean, *they*? He was one of *them*, one of the VR programmers, or *facilitators*, as they preferred to be called.

A flicker from several of the projectors caught his eye. He turned and saw a woman of African heritage in her late fifties, with a touch of gray and wearing an expensive business suit, walk through the door with a confident stride—literally through the door. Tom stood and the woman bowed towards him. Was this a custom of Chin Shu executives? Tom awkwardly returned the bow, not knowing if it was proper.

"Welcome to Chin Shu Industries, Doctor Hackett. I am Doctor Esther Washington,

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The Indoctrination of Youth: An Open Letter to My Son

By Jeremy Whitted

I have two children, Samantha (4) and Maxwell (2). As any father is wont to do, I have planned for their future. Not by starting a savings account and socking away for their education (I paid my way through college—they can do the same) or saving up for their first car (again, I paid for my own car/gas/insurance—they can, too). No, my plans are greater and far more insidious. But, to be honest, they mostly revolve around my son. Why not my daughter? Well, I plan on locking her in a closet for most of her adolescent and teen years to keep the boys away, so what's the point? If one of those boys decides to show up to my house anyway, I have a 5-foot Scottish Claymore with nary a bloodstain on it. Yet.

So to Maxwell goes the fruits of my scheming. For he, as his father before him, will be a geek. Like it or not. I write this open letter as a public decree of my intent.

Dear Max,

You are my son. My only son. To you falls great responsibility to carry on the family geekiness. I have therefore outlined your youth and my plans of indoctrination. You are free to refer to this letter at any time to make sure I am living up to my end. At certain ages, you will be fed different activities and interests. Embrace them. Love them. For they are key to your success as an adult.

Your life has been outlined as follows:

Age 2: We have started on a good note, because every Saturday morning, you sit engrossed as I throw in one of our many Bugs Bunny DVDs. It all starts with Bugs Bunny. I have long thought that part of the problem with kids today is with the cartoons they watch. There are no anvils falling on heads, no ducks being shot over and over, their bills launched to and fro, no carrot-chewing smart alec constantly getting the better of Elmer Fudd, Yosemite Sam, and anyone else who gets in his way. You will always have fond memories of these mornings watching Bugs.

Age 4: This is when you truly learn to love Hot Wheels. Right now, you know how to throw them, stick them in your mouth, and bang them against the wall. But when the time is right, we will purchase a proper track, draw city maps on a large sheet—and the art of Hot Wheels will be yours.

Age 6: There is a natural progression from Hot Wheels to LEGO. I'm not talking about bricks of different colors you can use to build houses. I'm talking about space LEGO, fantasy LEGO…the good stuff. We'll build the Millenium Falcon, the Space Shuttle, castles and cars. Then we'll tear

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them all apart, grab the instructions, and see how quickly we can put them back together again. Man, I can't wait…

Age 8: I'm not sure when the best time is, but I think this is the time to get you your own Mac (granted, you'll have to share it with your sister). This, my son, is your tool for the rest of your life. It may just start with the games, but it will soon open up to much much more. Don't let its ease of use, stability, and power intimidate you. It asks for nothing in return other than a few minutes each week staring at its raw beauty. Just don't let your mother catch you doing that too much—she worries enough as it is.

Age 9: This is about the age I read *The Chronicles of Narnia*. These won't be the first books you read, probably not even the first fantasy books, but this is when we start in earnest. After Narnia, maybe we'll just go straight to Harry Potter, or even Terry Brooks. But maybe we'll wait a couple years more and let you work your way up. Regardless, your love of Fantasy literature starts here, and it will never end, I assure you. Of course, you'll always have your monthly issue of Deep Magic to read (I honestly can't think of a good reason we won't still be publishing it seven years from now), so you won't run out. There will be movies, too, but some of the best, like the Lord of the Rings trilogy, will have to wait until you're a little older. Some won't, though, like Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger, Jason and the Argonauts, and Clash of the Titans. I'll approve those at this age. They are necessary for your development.

Age 10: The magic age. It was at about this age when I got my first set of polyhedron dice and rolled up my first Dungeons and Dragons character. It will be the same for you, too. I will be your Dungeon Master, guiding you through the dangers and pitfalls that await your first fighter, ready to take on the world. I will be easy on you at first. Maybe just some weak Kobolds while you get the hang of rolling that d20. Then some goblins. Eventually, you will be saving the maiden, slaying the dragons, and ruling your own kingdoms. This is what being a geek is all about. Maybe I'll even slip the Player's Handbook in your school backpack so you can experience that first embarrassment as your schoolmates learn what you do on Friday nights at home. But don't worry, son. Soon after, they will ask you if they can join the fun.

Age 12: At some point, you will have to learn what good music is. Goodness knows, if I leave it up to MTV, radio stations, and your friends at school, you'll never learn yourself. You'll learn to rock out to The Zoo by the eternal Scorpions, Queensryche's Operation: Mindcrime will blast from your speakers, and Dio's Holy Diver will be a regular in your collection. Metallica, Def Leppard (the old stuff, not their sissy recent releases), Styx, Black Sabbath, and many others will also grace your shelves. (You didn't know your father was a metal-head, did you?) Even some more recent music will be part of our lessons—Evanescense to name one. There is probably another. But your music tastes won't be limited to hard rock. You'll smile every time The Brian Setzer Orchestra comes on, and you'll learn to love the poet and musician Dan Fogelberg. Bugs Bunny will have introduced you to the classics, and that will never leave you. And lest I forget some of the best—the Jackson Five's ABC, Labelle's Lady Marmalade, and other great Disco epics of the 70s will be played regularly at our house. So your mother doesn't feel left out, I will leave the entire decade of the 80s in her care. Treat it all well, for there is much to love there.

continued on next page

Age 13: To be honest, you will probably have done this earlier, but if not, this is when sports comes into the picture. Maybe you'll play some soccer. Everyone should play soccer at some point. Don't worry, I'll explain all the rules as we watch it for hours on end. Along with Golf, 9-ball billiards, bowling, and of course, football. We root for the Falcons. Your father has been a fan his whole life. So will you.

Age 14: At this age, you can learn to love, without learning to emulate, The Simpsons. Homer, Bart, Ralph, Apu, Willie…they will be your friends and companions. Just don't do anything they say. We'll sit up nights and watch them together, and I'll show you the best episodes. Ralph falling in love with Lisa, Sherry Bobbins watching over the family…there are too many to list. While we're at it, if it's still going as it is today, we'll tune in to Adult Swim and catch Futurama and, if you're good and have shown me you don't let these cartoons influence you in a negative way, Family Guy. But only if you're good.

Age 16: Well, you love fantasy by now, and you love sports, so how about a little fantasy sports? Football, to be precise. We'll start our own league, maybe do our own offline draft, and we'll watch the stats to see how our players do. We probably won't watch all the games—your mother will want us at church—but that's ok. We'll just watch college ball all day on Saturday. Maybe we'll just do fantasy college football and be completely out of it on Saturdays. Your mother will love me for that.

Age 17: You have to wait a long time for Bruce Campbell. Not all of him, mind you. You'll have read his book, seen him on TV, caught his cameos in the Spider-Man movies…but you haven't seen Bruce until you've seen Evil Dead, Army of Darkness, and Bubba Ho-Tep. This is all shaky. Your mother may get mad at me. But you'll be 17—an adult. And you'll know a genius actor when you see one. Bruce is it. We'll have a marathon, maybe on the night of your 17th birthday. Evil Dead, Evil Dead 2, Army of Darkness…one right after the other. We'll laugh, we'll cry (from laughing so hard), we'll have a blast.

I think that should take care of it, Max. I do all this out of love. With this upbringing, you are sure to succeed in life. Don't listen to those who say you'll never find a girl or other similar hogwash. I met and married a woman far better than I deserved. The trick is keeping your more hardcore geekiness hidden until you're married and it's too late for her to say no. Trust me, it works.

With love, and only a little guilt,

Your father.

Tale of the Seal

By Anne Doucette

The small, gray cell held a thin blanket, a bronze basin, and Lyonis of Kyata. He was innocent, that much he knew. The thought almost made him laugh, because it did not matter, did it? Either way, here he was and here he would stay. Once more he reviewed his conversation with the interrogator, trying to make sense of it, like a small boy sifting through sand for a marble.

"Whatever you think I did, you are wrong."

"Oh, he says I'm wrong. Best to let him go then." The portly guard had snorted. "Try again."

"Will you at least tell me what I was supposed to have done?"

"Tell me what I had for breakfast this morning." The guard was nearly as tall as Lyonis, who exceeded the height of most men by at least two handsbreadths. And he was nearly as wide, or so it seemed, folds of flesh protruding from his pale-red livery, a cheaper version of the robes worn at court, supplemented by sturdy boots rather than soft, embroidered slippers.

"Sausages." By Isis, that had been a stupid thing to say, but for a second he had actually taken the guard seriously. His mind cringed at the thought of how the man had laughed at him. The longer he stayed in this small cell, the stupider he felt, as if he had been stripped of all his confidence, all the things he knew well and was known for doing.

Torn between crying out for pardon and begging to know what he had been accused of, he remained prone on the floor of his cell.

The thought made him wonder anew whether there were others there with him. He had neither seen nor heard anyone since being brought to his cell.

Before long, as if summoned by the force of his psychic will, a man's footsteps did indeed begin sounding from a distance. Torn between crying out for pardon and begging to know what he had been accused of, he remained prone on the floor of his cell. With a harsh inhalation of breath, he forced himself to stand and walk over to the network of iron bars separating his body from the open air.

Soon enough, he saw a fat man with sparse brown hair and a too-casual smile on his face. It was the same man who had come to him yesterday, but this time he was carrying a metal tray and a mug. Lyonis smelled meat and bread. "So," the interrogator said, as if he had come to visit and share a quick lunch, "have you decided to speak up yet?"

Lyonis felt his stomach rumble and absently slapped it with the flat of his palm, too distracted to be anything but annoyed at the intrusion. "I still want to know what I am being accused of."

The man nodded as if to say he had expected little more from this rabble. "Very well." He shrugged and turned away, food and drink still clasped in his hand.

"Please, sir," Lyonis said. "Will you not at least admit it is possible that I may not know what you are talking about?"

The fat man paused to consider this, rolling his second chin between thumb and forefinger.

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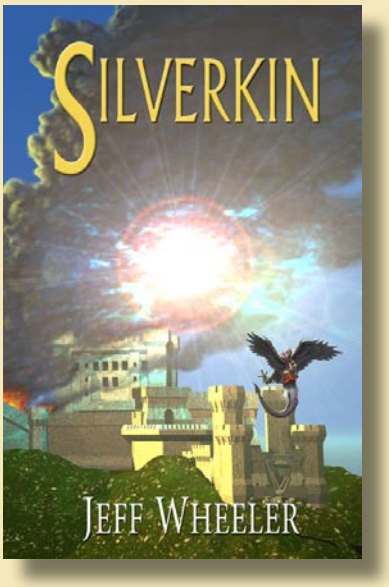
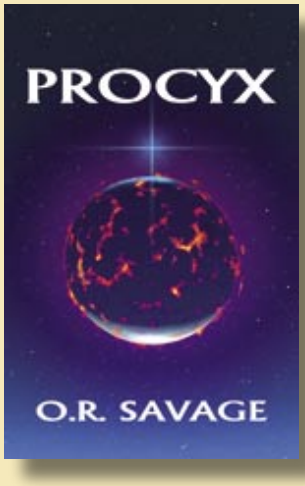
Announcing two new Amberlin Books releases! *Silverkin*, sequel to *Landmoor*, is written by Jeff Wheeler and completes the Landmoor Duology. *Deeper Magic: The Second Collection* contains selected short stories from our second year of publication. Both books should be available by the end of November through Amazon.com and other online retailers. Check our website throughout the month for the status on their availability.

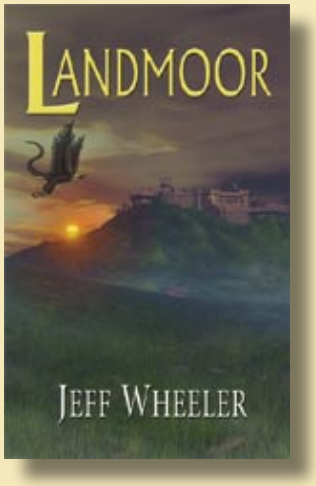


Silverkin
The anticipated sequel to Landmoor has finally arrived, continuing the adventures of Thealos Quickfellow.

Deeper Magic:
The next collection of short stories compiled from the second year of Deep Magic.

Other publications released by Amberlin Books (click the covers to order).





AMBERLIN BOOKS

Stone Games

By Keri Stevenson

Lord Altalion tried to concentrate on his tablet and ignore the voices, but it was getting harder and harder.

"It's your fault!"

"Yours! And you wouldn't dare throw that!"

Lord Altalion winced as a heavy jug crashed through the window at his shoulder and sprayed glass all over him. It bounced easily enough off his skin, but *really*. That window would cost him two days and some magic he really didn't want to spend, to repair it.

This had gone on long enough.

Putting down his wineglass and tablet, the stone-fey regarded the arguing pair of human slaves through the broken window and shook his head. It had seemed like a minor afternoon's amusement when he ordered the noisy human man, Taerlian, to wed the equally noisy woman, Ria. They hated each other. They would squabble, and it would be amusing.

They did squabble. They were not as amusing as he had planned.

That was the fourth window Taerlian had destroyed in the past week. Ria was always setting buildings on fire when she didn't watch her Scarlet magic. In the past, that had made Altalion laugh, because it was always for a different and equally human reason, and sometimes the fire burned down the trees in interesting patterns. But now all her arguments with Taerlian trod the same weary path, and Altalion didn't want to listen to them any longer.

That was the fourth window Taerlian had destroyed in the past week. Ria was always setting buildings on fire when she didn't watch her Scarlet magic.

"I can't believe you did that."

"Probably because you burned the last of your cleverness in that fire you lit last night."

They hadn't even bred any children to work in the house, which Altalion had thought would be an equally pleasant second consequence of the mating. Ria was taller than Taerlian, with darker hair and skin, but Taerlian had the most remarkable blue eyes and harp-player's hands. Altalion had imagined a blue-eyed, tall human playing the harp some years in the future, and he had anticipated with quiet certainty that it would, of course, happen.

It didn't seem likely now. His informers among the slaves, the ones he pushed just a little harder with both rewards and punishment to make sure nothing untoward happened, had told him they even slept in separate sheds. The drivers were wary of caging them up with each other, sure that Ria would burn Taerlian to death or Taerlian would smash her skull open.

Altalion frowned thoughtfully. He had to do something about them. But what?

Then he smiled, and leaned through the window, careful to maneuver his heavy stone limbs so they didn't crush the remaining glass. They both stopped arguing almost at once, though Taerlian looked up before Ria. The human male was one of a few slaves who seemed to have that kind of awareness of the stone-fey. Altalion shrugged. *Maybe his children will have it.*

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Science Fiction

Singularity Sky
By Charles Stross

In the twenty-first century an entity known as the Eschaton introduced faster-than-light travel to Earth. The Eschaton also took a large portion of Earth's population and scattered it among the stars. No one knows who or what the Eschaton is, but it has benignly watched over mankind's actions ever since.

Now, in the twenty-fifth century, the colonies created by the Eschaton are beginning to find their roots again and also to exert themselves against each other and against Earth. One such colony is the New Republic which was founded by refugees from Slavic nations who longed for 'the good old days' when rulers were despotic and a lot less democratic. During an attempt to 'land grab' another colony, the New Republic finds itself visited by an unknown race known only as the Festival, whose motives are a mystery. The book opens with the unforgettable line, "The day war was declared, a rain of telephones fell clattering to the cobblestones from the sky above Novy Petrograd." And that's just the beginning.

Martin Springfield is a citizen of Earth who has been contracted by the New Republic to help them construct warships for their conquest. Unbeknownst to the New Republic, however, Martin is also an agent of the Eschaton, sent to keep an eye on what the New Republic is up to, and to do the Eschaton's bidding.

Rachel Mansour is an enhanced human being with the United Nations of Earth who has been sent to observe what the New Republic is up to. Rachel and Martin soon meet up and find in each other comfort and peace in the crazy, repressive world of the Festival-tinged New Republic.

Singularity Sky is indeed a novel of ideas. Who are the Festival and what do they want? Why are they providing the repressed masses of the New Republic with taboo technology? Is man's future post-human? Will there be a place for the common man? Are we reaching further than our species is capable of grasping? These and other ideas are examined in Charles Stross's debut novel.

Charles Stross is not, however, a new voice on the block, but has been writing short stories for a number of years. It was with great pleasure, though, that I read *Singularity Sky*. The short story is a great medium, but someone with Stross's ideas should not limit himself to the confines of the short story: it is only with a novel that he can let loose and explore at whim the many ideas and problems that technology poses. He does not disappoint.

Even though it is a novel of ideas, *Singularity Sky* is also a riveting and exciting tale, written in the genre that is coming to be known as the New Space Opera. Like the space opera of old, the New Space Opera has galactic forces vying with each other, emperors dueling via their great space fleets, etc. But unlike the space opera of old, the science behind the New Space Opera is accurate to the best current knowledge, and as the summary above suggests, it is more than just brain candy. Some of the other authors associated with the New Space Opera are Alistair Reynolds and Cory Doctorow, but Charles Stross is by far the most talented of the batch. If you want to know where science fiction is headed, you cannot do better than to read Charles Stross.

Possible objectionable material: mild sex scene.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

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Book Review: Fantasy

The Second Sons Trilogy (Lion of Senet, Eye of the Labyrinth, Lord of Shadows)

By Jennifer Fallon

In Ranadon, the land of the two suns, night rarely comes. The day moves from full sun to partial sun to a dusk and back to full sun. However, once every few hundred years, one of the suns disappears and true night is known. As with many fantasy trilogies, *The Second Sons* occurs in a pseudo-medieval world, so the denizens of Ranadon do not know why one of the suns goes out. Since the science is not known, it is viewed as a judgment from the reigning deity, the goddess.

A generation before the novel begins, the countries of Ranadon are in disarray, starving since their agriculture is not adapted to the dark, and certain invasive plants grow only when the second sun goes dark. One of the monarchs, Antonov Letanya, the Lion of Senet, comes to the aid of the hurting island kingdom of Dhevyn. But in the process, he takes the land over. Behind him is the scheming priestess Belagren, who has emerged as the voice of the goddess and who, as such, manipulates Antonov into killing his own child under the pretense of appeasing the goddess.

The series opens a generation later when the children of the leaders are all now coming of age. Dirk Provin is the second son of the Duke of Elcast of Dhevyn and the Princess Morna of Damita. One day a body washes up on the beach from a ship wreck. Dirk bravely saves the man's life and has him taken back to the Elcast castle. Unbeknownst to Dirk, the man he has saved is the exiled king of Dhevyn... and also Dirk's true father. Dirk soon finds himself caught up in treachery and subterfuge as the older generation uses the younger generation as pawns. The younger generation, however, has plans of its own, but first they must unravel the truth of the past, since the older generation isn't speaking of it.

Dirk eventually finds that he is the key pawn in the game that the Lion is playing to secure Ranadon for Senet. But Dirk has been blessed with an incredible intellect, and so to save the whole world of Ranadon from becoming enslaved to the false religion that Belagren is advocating, he sets in motion a series of events that will eventually mean the death of many friends and cause those who survive to hate him deeply. This is the only way he knows to subvert the deep influence that Belagren's depraved religion has asserted upon the people.

The Second Sons Trilogy is an incredibly gripping story of intrigue in both religion and politics. This is not black-and-white fantasy, but because it dwells so heavily in the grey areas, it strikes a more realistic chord than much fantasy nowadays. The good is the ultimate aim, but Dirk Provin quickly realizes that there is no way to achieve that end without himself having to walk a fine line that often seems to wander into evil deeds. By the end of the trilogy, the reader feels almost numb with the magnitude of what has happened, and with the magnitude of the questions asked: How deeply does faith go? At what point do the ends no longer justify the means? Is lasting peace worth the price?

Jennifer Fallon shows in this trilogy that she is quite adept at not only handling a large and complex story, but that she can do so with a finesse and artistry that doesn't appear too often in fantasy.

Possible objectionable material: Belagren's religion includes an annual festival where a hallucinogenic aphrodisiac drug is ingested. The result is an uncontrolled orgy. The drug also gets used elsewhere in the story, with graphic results.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

The Eyre Affair

By Jasper Fforde

In Great Britain in 1985, the Crimean War is still raging after more than 100 years, religious zealots go from door to door trying to convince you of the truth

continued on next page

of their belief that Bacon and not Shakespeare was the immortal bard, and do-it-yourself genetic re-engineering kits have brought back the dodo (which is the current rage). To keep peace in this bizarre world, England has created a new police force of Special Operations, or Spec Ops for short. Thursday Next, after fighting in the Crimea, has joined division 27: Literary Detectives. Her job is to police crimes against literature: keeping the aforementioned Baconians in line, making sure that Byronic forgeries are found and punished (by death), and ensuring that all novels end as they should.

Nothing, though, has prepared Thursday Next for her latest assignment. Thursday's eccentric inventor uncle, Mycroft Next, has discovered a way to enter into the actual text of books. Arch-villain Acheron Hades has stolen that technology and is now holding the lead character of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* hostage to the tune of 20 million pounds. Thursday's assignment is to find her way into *Jane Eyre* and save not only the heroine, but the storyline itself.

Of all the fantasies I've read in the past decade, *The Eyre Affair* has to be the most inventive, bar none. Within fantasy, there is the idea of the 'secondary world' which is any world that is patently not the 'mundane' world of the reader. Specific examples are Middle-earth, Shannara, Narnia. However, the world of Thursday Next, while obviously modeled on the mundane world and having many common points of reference, is so refreshingly different, that I would say it challenges most of the fully realized secondary worlds in its uniqueness.

Second, the wordplay in the Thursday Next novels has no counterpart within fantasy. Even Terry Pratchett's excellent Discworld series does not hold a candle to Jasper Fforde's realized world for wordplay and hilarious ideas. As one friend described the series, 'This is crack for English majors!' As an English major, I must say this is true. So rich and dense are the jokes within the text that Fforde has provided a set of annotations on his Web site to guide readers through. I'm happy to say I picked up on more than half the jokes and puns, but even so, I missed quite a few. (And for American readers, there are a lot of British-based jokes—such as the name of Thursday's lover: Landen Park-Laine—that need explaining unless you're an Anglophile.)

Even though there is a fairly large cast of characters, Fforde focuses on just a handful in order to create depth of character. By the end of the first story arc (which concludes with book four, *Something Rotten*, which has just been released), the reader considers Thursday, Landen, and a handful of others as dear friends.

Overall, I can't help but recommend this book (and ensuing series) as a light and refreshing detour. If you feel you need a break from reading epic and high fantasy (I know I do every now and then), but still want something fantastic, the Thursday Next novels will meet the bill.

Possible objectionable material: mildly offensive language is used throughout the series, with two of the villains having names of obviously scatological origin.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy
The Nameless Day
By Sarah Douglass

The fourteenth century was a tumultuous time in the history of Western man. This century as we know it suffered plague, famine, and climate change. At the beginning of the century, Europeans seemed more concerned with their spiritual welfare, whereas by century's end, the focus was on international conquest. What happened to explain this change?

That, at least, is the challenge that Sarah Douglass has set herself in her 'latest' trilogy, *The Crucible*, the first of which is *The Nameless Day*. (The trilogy was originally published four years ago in Douglass' native Australia, but is just making its appearance in the United States.)

Douglass' view of the fourteenth century (as expressed above) may be debatable, but with enough willing suspension of disbelief that shouldn't affect the story she has set out to tell.

Douglass' fourteenth century begins with the access point to the gates of Hell, a place in Germany known as

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'The Cleft' being controlled by an English Dominican friar by the name of Wynkyn de Worde. Brother Wynkyn, however, succumbs to the plague sweeping Europe before he has had a chance to appoint and train a successor. Thus, for the next thirty years, the demons kept within the Cleft are allowed to escape into the world on the two solstices, the winter one of which lends this book its name.

Thirty years later, Thomas Neville, of the powerful Neville family of northern England, is a Dominican monk who has taken up the cowl as penance for willingly allowing his mistress to die rather than acknowledge the child she carried as his. Thomas finds himself coming to Rome at the same time that the papacy returns from its 'Babylonian captivity' in Avignon, France. Thomas is soon visited by an apparition claiming to be the archangel Michael, who tells him he is Worde's successor and to go to Germany to find a book that gave Worde his power over the Cleft.

Upon reaching the Cleft, Thomas is seduced by a local woman who is in league with the demons who have escaped from the Cleft. As he couples with her, Thomas has a vision of a beautiful woman he has never met.

After this encounter, Thomas learns that the book has gone back to Worde's home friary in England, and so he sets out on a long journey back to his homeland. On the way, he falls in with his relatives and friends—the ruling families of England—who are in France trying to claim the land as England's own. Things quickly become complicated as Thomas realizes he doesn't know whom he can trust, for demons can assume the form of any human. Thomas himself has his own personal demons he must confront before he can see clearly the actual demons who may be around him. Also, he discovers that his uncle's mistress is the woman who appeared in his vision while being seduced in Germany and she claims that the child she carries is his.

Thomas eventually returns to England, armed with the knowledge that the demons are trying to put one of their own upon the throne, but not sure exactly who that is. Whom can he trust and who, exactly, is the demon king? Thomas has his own ideas, but how much are they ideas colored by his own shattered faith?

I started this book out not too excited about the idea. It seems quite the thing to bash religion in a lot of current fantasy, but by the end of the novel (which, be warned, is the first of a trilogy and doesn't resolve many story lines) I was engrossed, wanting to see where Douglass would take the story. Is the church good? evil? or is there something more, something we haven't been told the entire story of yet? I have a feeling that it is this latter, but unfortunately, I'll have to wait until the next two volumes come out to find out.

At this point, with only one third of the story told, I can recommend the book: the characters are well constructed with Thomas being not entirely a sympathetic character, but not the anti-hero either. He grows significantly in the course of the book and it's obvious he will grow even more as the story unfolds in future volumes. The story itself is compelling and only drags slightly in the middle as Thomas wanders through Europe. However, by novel's end the narrative purpose of that wandering is made clear and obvious.

Possible objectionable material: Thomas is seduced by a minion of the demons in a somewhat graphic sexual encounter. Also, some of the language between the English nobles is a bit coarse.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Silverkin
By Jeff Wheeler

Chapter I

It is an awkward thing for the barter's son to be gagged. It was impossible to negotiate, reason, or articulate very well with a wad of leather forced between his teeth and tied with a strong knot behind. The Crimson Wolfsmen had gagged Thealos Quickfellow three days earlier to stop his arguments and protests. Tough cords bound his wrists as well, a leash controlled by one of his captors. It was one of the most humiliating times in Thealos' life. But he said as much as he could with his eyes, and he hoped his glares stung.

Thealos wanted to scream with frustration. Not that it would have done any good in his situation, but the feeling had settled right below his stomach, all twisting and squirming, until he thought it would make him burst. Each day brought them closer to Avisahn, the Shae kingdom he had abandoned. It felt so long ago that he did not think to recognize the foaming river or the huge redwoods and pines on the other side. Each day he expected to be rescued by his protector, and each day ended in torment. Was Jaerod coming? At night he lay awake, listening to every whisper in the dark, every cricket and whistle, waiting for the tingling feeling on the back of his neck that told him the Sleepwalker was near.

It was while the hawk swooped upwards that the familiar prick of awareness went down Thealos' spine, sending a shiver of gooseflesh down his arms. Xenon must have seen the look in his eyes, because the Wolfsman drew his elegant leaf-blade, gazing around the grove.

It never came.

The quaere of Crimson Wolfsmen bundling him back to the Shae homeland stopped to rest in a small grove of elm trees near the border of the Trident river. They did this more for his benefit than theirs, and they did not speak to him when they loosened the gag and gave him water. He knew that if he tried talking, they would gag him again quickly, even though he had stopped speaking the day before. Everything he had said had been met by coldness and disgust and sometimes anger. Anger that earned a cuff to the side of his head or bonds fastened just a little more snugly. He resented them, especially their leader, Xenon. How he hated the man. His obsession with his mission clouded everything else. Thealos wondered if he could even think for himself or if abandoning that was a prerequisite for becoming a Crimson Wolfsman.

The Wolfsman named Nymir gave him some more water. Thealos gulped it down and took a few strips of boiled beef to ease the hunger raging in his stomach. Sweat trickled down his sides. He wiped his brow with his forearm and tried to ignore the pain throbbing from his swollen wrists. Glancing around, he wondered how far away he was from the place where he had first stumbled into Tannon's band weeks ago. He had worn bonds in those days as well but had

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He looked about the large stone room, broken up only by several large pillars and Zo's perch in one corner, upon which the eagle sat. Unlit torches lined the walls as sunlight poured in through the windows. Barille failed to understand why Dorin kept this room so barren. Even a single bookcase would do wonders.

"Lately I've been wondering," Barille continued, "where our powers come from."

Dorin looked as if he'd been slapped in the face. "Why, you know as well as I that they come from everything around us. The trees, land, people, wildlife… it's all-surrounding and encompassing. All we do is focus it when the need arises. Or am I misunderstanding the question?"

Barille stared intently at his companion—this ambitious, dark-haired man dressed in lavish red robes embroidered with golden runes. And then there was Barille himself. Plain, with graying hair and beard, and still wearing the typical, bland, dingy blue cloak that many in their profession wore. Maybe now wasn't the time. Maybe in a few more years when Dorin had-

"Well?" Dorin pressed.

Barille chuckled. "Forgive me. My mind wanders." He paused for a moment, realizing if he didn't share now, he might never do so. "It's just that I've begun to wonder if there must be a core source. Otherwise, it would eventually run out."

Dorin frowned. "You know magic can neither be created nor destroyed. Only directed, which is where we-"

Barille held up a hand. "No, I mean, what was the original source? What *is* the original source? Does it still exist? What gave it life? What gave us life?" He uncrossed his legs and stepped to the ground. His teacup vanished as he began to pace.

Dorin's brow furrowed. "Why, from the Fates, of course. They-"

"But that's just it!" Barille stopped pacing and pointed a finger at him. "Except for the record-keepers of old who claim to have communed with them, what guarantees do we have that they ever existed? And if so, who made them? Was it all an accident? Or is there a pattern and reason to it all?" He resumed his walk, his gaze boring into the floor.

"Ahhh…" Dorin leaned back, regardless that there was no visible support. "You're asking the oldest question in the cosmos—where, when, and with whom or what did the very, *very* beginning start?"

Barille paused his step, his face contorted in thought. "Yes. Yes, I suppose that's what I'm asking. Something had to grant depth to everything… or is that preconception merely an illusion?" He looked to his friend. "What do you think?"

"About the question? Or its validity and relevance?"

Barille rolled his eyes. "Obviously it's not about the question."

"You know me well, old man. Maybe you *have* been paying attention to me all these years." Dorin grinned mischievously before becoming serious. "But why bother to know? Why even bother to care?" He took another sip of tea. "One might as well ask 'When did time begin, and when will it end?'"

"I see nothing wrong with that question."

Dorin sighed. "My dear Barille. In the end, we're all simply worm-food, so why does it even matter to ask such questions? What difference could it make?" Dorin flashed a patronizing smile as he likewise stood upon the floor. But before he could say anything more, Zo screeched from across the room atop his pedestal. "Now, Zo," Dorin scolded. "That's quite enough out of you. Resume your vigil and report anything unusual."

The eagle stomped and squawked one last time before spreading its wings and sailing out a nearby window.

"What'd he say?" Barille asked.

Dorin scowled and shook his head. "He said he agreed with you and that I should try listening. I declare that creature is getting more cantankerous each year."

"Why should he be silly to ponder such questions?"

Dorin laughed. "A wonderful bit of misdirection, since you're really asking, 'Why should it make *you* silly to ponder such questions?'" He drew closer. "In regards to Zo, it's simply because he's a bird, so why should he even entertain himself with such thoughts? His body is racked with thousands of years of instinct. Nothing more, nothing less. And in regard to us… I'm afraid the answer is the same."

Barille harrumphed. "I would not compare us to animals. Certainly we-"

"Oh, please. We're simply beasts foraging for a living, just like any other creature. Do you require proof?"

With that, Dorin muttered an incantation. They were now in the middle of Dunberg, a small hamlet of only two hundred people. With both wizards incorporeal, their bodies remaining at Dorin's, it made for excellent spying, since they could see and hear one another, while the town's residents could not see or hear them.

"What do you see?" Dorin pressed.

"Just people. Doing what they always do."

"Exactly. Just doing what they always do. There's no enigmatic, all-powerful, unseen, divine or malicious intervention in their lives. They—all of us—are simply ants with larger bodies. Busy shuffling about. Never really-"

"Hurry along, Cynthia, or we'll be late. And you wouldn't want to miss the arrival of your new cousin."

Barille and Dorin turned to watch what appeared to be a mother and father hurrying toward them, along with a small girl in tow. After some more futile urging, the father stopped, picked up the child, and the three of them continued. The three villagers then passed through them, unawares.

"I seriously doubt," Barille said, watching after them, "that animals ever feel a sense of lateness. From simply observing my own gryphon, Tybra, I know he can feel anger, sadness, and even joy. But they do not-" He shook his head. "But I did not come to discuss our similarities or differences with animals, but to simply pose the question, 'Is there more?'"

With that, Barille waved his hand and both of their ghostly images found themselves floating amongst the stars.

Dorin gasped at the surrounding darkness and distant lights, along with their three moons and brilliant sun. He inadvertently grasped at Barille's arm for balance, but quickly withdrew upon realizing there was nothing to balance against. "My," he said, smiling sheepishly, "but I do have a lot to learn yet, don't I?"

"As do I. And in much more than the strongest arcana."

Barille made a sweeping gesture at the universe surrounding them. "How could one believe this just happened? Nothing we know of could even begin to imagine such an expanse, much less create it."

"It didn't 'just happen.' As I said before, the Fates had much to do with it, along with the other gods before they all died." Dorin put up a hand before Barille could interject. "I know, I

know. You want to know who created them." He sighed. "You surprise me. After all, it was you that instructed me almost two hundred years ago in that which I'm telling you now."

"Then tell me. If the gods are all dead, what holds it together?" Barille pointed to the moons. "What keeps them from drifting away?" He looked to the sun. "Why does fire create both light and heat?" He placed both hands up near his face. "Why does my body back in your tower require breath?"

"Everything was simply created and then left to its own devices."

Barille shook his head. "I cannot believe the universe maintains itself. There must be a grand design that imagined everything—from the core of the largest star to the heartbeat of the smallest gnat." He paused, sighing. "There simply must be more. A force. A person. A power. Something."

Dorin looked down. "May I?"

Barille followed his gaze and smiled. "By all means."

Inhaling deeply, Dorin closed his eyes and spoke a few archaic words. Suddenly, they found themselves surrounded by water with various forms of ocean life passing through them.

Dorin blushed. "I believe it's safe to say that I missed. But that is the furthest distance I've ever attempted." He muttered more words, amidst Barille's chuckling.

But Barille's laughter instantly stopped as he stared at the scene now before them.

"This," Dorin said smugly, "is the result of your 'divine masterpiece' theory."

Carnage ran unchecked about them in a clatter of shouts, weapons, and bodies.

"No doubt you've heard about the recent war between the kingdoms of Rylunn, Haskthorn, *and* Nalindor," Dorin continued. "A threesome of petty kings who can't agree on their borders, and the tens of thousands of men willing to give up their lives because of it."

Barille watched as a spear sailed through the air, imbedding itself into the stomach of a man wearing Nalindor's colors. He slumped to his knees, blood spewing from his mouth as a Rylunn soldier ran up with a two-handed sword and lopped off his head. With a cry of triumph, the slayer screamed to the heavens, but was cut short when an arrow imbedded itself into his exposed neck.

The two wizards watched in morbid silence the slaughter brought about by thousands of swords, spears, arrows, and catapults. As the living rushed to avenge the dead, they only seemed to add to their numbers. Vultures and crows circled high overhead as grass, mud, and blood saturated the battleground in a grotesque mosaic.

"Remind me again," Dorin finally said. "How we are any different than animals? And how is it that we—infinitesimal specks within the universe you've just shown me—should dare to claim a privileged birthright within this tapestry of mere fate?" He shook his head as a crushing boulder fell, killing two men and wounding several others as it rolled. "Circumstance and chance. Wishes and whims of dead gods. No divine blacksmiths forged eternity and all it entails. And even if there were, what would it matter? The universe is what it is, and we shall eventually pass on, just as everything else."

Barille closed his eyes as the clashing of steel drummed in his ears, followed by cries of anger and pleas for mercy. Yet the images continued to flash through his mind. Then, with a mere thought, the sounds vanished. Upon opening his eyes, he found himself in a small cottage, back in the village of Dunberg.

"From one extreme to the other, eh?" Dorin said, chuckling. "I might have known you'd bring us here."

Before them lay another person screaming in anguish, only this time a woman giving birth. To one side of the room stood the little girl from before, wide-eyed and transfixed, as she watched her mother give gentle instruction to the woman lying in bed. Barille surmised that the husbands were waiting in the outer room.

A short while later, with a final cry of desperation, a small head appeared between the woman's legs, quickly followed by a slippery body trailing a long, squiggly cord. As the midwife declared it a boy, the new mother burst into tears and reached for the child. Barille turned with a smile to the small girl, who only now stepped closer.

"But you forget," Dorin said, "that this grows up to be the men we just saw. And that they all started out exactly like this. Proof that we are indeed a flawed design. For embedded within this newborn sits the foundation for all the greed and malice one could ever desire. We, this world, the cosmos—regardless of where and when each one's conception occurred—are in a constant state of decay. Until finally all will be lost."

As the midwife began cleaning the baby, it burst into tears.

"See?" Dorin continued. "Already it has started. The child has a need, and until that need is met, it will scream until its dying breath. And, fifty years from now, when it is an old man that will not have changed, regardless if it ends up starving in a gutter, or choking on roast swine while seated upon the most lavish throne."

Barille stepped closer to the infant. "Why do you equate death with hopelessness? And need with weakness?"

The midwife handed the baby to the mother's outstretched arms. She took it and placed its mouth to her breast. Without coaxing or instruction, the child stopped its crying and suckled. It then opened its eyes, revealing them to be an icy blue. Its hand awkwardly reached up, until it finally rested upon its mother's breast. The eyes once again closed.

Dorin shook his head. "I fail to see how you can elevate this single entity's relevance above the destruction we just saw."

As Barille looked down into the child's face, he smiled. "I fail to see how you cannot."

Suddenly, both wizards found themselves back in their bodies at Dorin's. Only then did Barille feel the tears that had trickled down his face and buried themselves within his scraggly, unkempt beard.

"I see there's no swaying you on the matter," Dorin said, eyeing his friend. "However, I feel obligated to warn you that contemplating and pursuing such matters may, in the end, make you mad."

"Or enlightened."

Dorin smiled. "Maybe there's no difference."

Barille moved towards the door, which opened with a wave of his hand. "I had hoped you would journey with me to seek this answer to life's greatest mystery."

Dorin laughed. "When you say it like that, how could one refuse? But still, I must decline, as I believe the solution cannot be determined. And even if it could, what would it change?"

"Well," Barille said, looking down. "Me, I suppose."

Dorin smiled as though he were studying a child. "We shall see." He extended an arm. "Until next time. Your place?"

"Of course."

Both wizards gripped arms, just as they always did at the end of their monthly visits. Only this time it lasted longer than usual.

Finally, Barille turned and began his long walk back down the mountainside. Strangely enough, it was the first visit he could remember Dorin not commenting on his walking between their two towers, rather than teleporting.

He kicked a rock, sending it tumbling on ahead. He watched it gain speed as it rolled and bumped down the rocky slope. Could such a small object remain on the path all the way to the end? Or would it inevitably fall off the edge in its attempt? As it disappeared around a bend, Barille felt comfort in not knowing.

The End

Jeremy Yoder has published in the fantasy anthology Cloaked in Shadow: Dark Tales of Elves *and in the mystery anthology* Who Died In Here?. *He has new fiction coming in* Fantastical Visions III. *Though he continues to write, he is currently enjoying (and being fascinated with) his three-month-old daughter, who is every bit as beautiful as his wife. (www.jeremyyoder.net)*

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Director of Cybernetic Research, but you can call me Esther."

Tom resisted the urge to shake the woman's hand. He wouldn't have anything to grab on to anyway, since the image of the woman was just projected and not really there. In an effort to sound more confident than he felt, he managed a thank you, but it came out in a nervous squeak.

"Please have a seat."

Tom did and tried to force himself to relax. Don't fidget. Don't interrupt. Don't look nervous. This self-discipline seemed to be working until he got a good look at Esther, and saw the glint of metal lining her cheeks. It had characteristics of the Binshu cognitive enhancement series, but what was the model? He knew all of them, but didn't recognize it. It must have been a prototype. It seemed like a couple of years ago no one wanted to publicly admit they had implants, but now even the executives opted for implants with external apparatus. Funny. When they first came out, the workforce complained they were being forced into microsurgery just to maintain a competitive edge in the marketplace: extra strength, better sensory perception, or dexterity. Then the cerebral enhancement series came out, and now everyone wanted to wear them. They were as stylish as jewelry. But not for Tom. He would never subject himself to a direct machine interface: an earring, yes; a fiber optic connection at the base of his medulla oblongata, forget it.

Esther must have noted his reaction. "Do you have a problem working with cyborgs?"

Tom shook his head. "No."

"An anti-cybernetic bias still runs strong in some sectors, so I feel the need to ask. One would think that that kind of prejudice had been wiped out by now, but...."

"Yes, ma'am, one would think. We've been a race of cyborgs ever since the first pacemaker was installed."

Esther smirked and nodded. "Relax, Tom. May I call you Tom?"

"Of course."

"Good. And please don't take this interview as seriously as the last candidate. She said she wouldn't get out of the chair until I hired her."

Tom blinked.

"I had to call the police."

Tom blinked twice.

"You're supposed to laugh when I make a joke, Tom."

Tom forced a smile. "I take it you didn't hire her?"

"We did," Esther drew out her words, "and she'll be your supervisor."

Tom laughed, feeling the tension break.

"Now, you're here for the position of," she closed her eyes as if reading something internally, "the position of Android Engineer Level 3."

"Yes."

"Briefly, would you summarize your work history and education for me?"

Tom cleared his throat. "I did my undergraduate work at UCLA—BS in Quantum Engineering and Masters in Advanced AI Studies." He stopped, not knowing if Esther was technically savvy or one of those upper managers that received her position by climbing the career ladder of finance or marketing. "AI stands for Artificial Intelligence. It means that the computer program can think on its own and…."

Esther raised a hand, revealing more cybernetic implants tucked under her sleeve. "No need to explain, Tom. I also hold engineering degrees, and, if you haven't noticed," she tapped the implant on the base of her skull, "the cerebral-internet interface helps." She smiled. "I'm

wired, you know."

"Wouldn't the correct term be wireless?"

"Only on the outside, dear."

Tom laughed, beginning to feel like he had known Esther for years. She exuded a grandmotherly I-know-you-better-than-yourself-and-still-love-you-honey personality.

"Then I received my doctorate from Caltech, thesis on re-animating soul recordings … they're also called *life* recordings but," he cleared his throat, glancing at the floor, "you already know that." His glance caught his hands. They had been fidgeting and his palms were sweaty. He quickly sat on his hands; then, thinking that was an obvious sign of nervousness, he pulled them out and folded them on his lap. "It's all there on the résumé. Did you get a copy?"

Esther nodded and tapped the display on her desk. She probably didn't need to use the display since she had internet-cerebral access. Tom had worked with three people who had these implants. Each one of them had the habit of using physical objects as symbols of mental processes.

"And your work on Virtual Reality Artificial Intelligence?"

Tom smiled. If anything was going to get him into Chin Shu, it was his working on VeRAI. "Yes, I was one of the members of the Bell Labs team that spearheaded the project."

"You are far too modest, Tom. From what I understand, you were a key player. VeRAI based on life recordings has surpassed all expectations. Last quarter it contributed over thirteen and a half percent to Lucent's revenue. It appears that little, old widows like to have a VeRAI of their husbands walking around the house."

"Yes, well, I'm not aware of all the marketing aspects, but it has provided sufficient funds for research."

Esther leaned forward. "That is what we are interested in doing here at Chin Shu Industries, Tom. The VeRAI are holograms. It's too costly to install the projectors in existing structures. Each installation requires a site survey to minimize shadow zones—areas the projects can't reach. And for the little old ladies, their VeRAI husbands can't leave home with them to play bingo."

Tom nodded. He knew all this, and if this were any indication of the rest of the interview, it would be a breeze.

"Most important of all," Esther continued, "our most senior customers would like someone to help out around the house, and not just look at. So, we would like to bring someone on board who can help us reach our next marketing plateau: VeRAI assisted androids. It would give us a great marketing advantage over our competitors with their mentally clumsy androids. Do you think you can handle that?"

The obvious answer would be yes. What else would he say, *No, but do you have a janitor job available?* "Of course," he said. "It would require reducing the size of the psyche matrix. Right now it exceeds an android's memory capacity. I've read where Yoshibinu Labs tried using a wireless network, but the VeRAI equipped android went into sleep mode whenever it went out of range, and that caused all sorts of problems when the wife...." He trailed off, suddenly remembering Esther's wireless link. Even though Esther was human, she probably relied on the link for data and might take offence at the comment. Tom stammered, "Ah, well, you get the picture."

Esther glared at him, and then chuckled. "It gives new meaning to the term reboot." She glanced down at his resumé. "And your reason for leaving Bell Labs was…?"

"Um…." He wasn't sure. He drew a complete blank. He sat there and couldn't think of

the reason for quitting, or was he fired? He vaguely remembered something about an accident, but nothing he could put his finger on. Nothing. He was painfully aware of each second that passed without an answer, and that awareness further sealed any access to lost memory.

Esther waved the question away, and for the first time in the interview, Tom saw that the director looked more nervous than he, as if she had asked a forbidden question. "That's alright Tom, eh, never mind. Another question: are you willing to relocate?"

Tom tensed and felt the wellspring of perspiration about to burst forth again. He dreaded this question, but knew it was bound to come. He just didn't expect to hear it this early in the interview. He let out a long, slow breath. "No, we—my wife and I -- are very involved with our extended families and our church."

"Then do you think you'll be able to work there … at our remote VR site in Warren?"

"Working at a remote VR site does have its limitations, but I've done it many times before. Most of the programming work is done in VR anyway; it's just that long-distance personal interactions are difficult."

"Hopefully, if you're hired, you can help improve VR technology for us."

The rest of the interview proceeded without difficulty for Tom. Answers to questions concerning his decisiveness, creativity, job performance, publications, and career goals came without difficulty.

At last, Esther said with a smile, "Very good Dr. Hackett. We would like you to be a part of our team." She bowed, and Tom returned the gesture. "See the receptionist on the way out to schedule a second interview."

"Yes, ma'am."

* * *

Chin Shu Industries Headquarters in Shenzhen, China

Tom disappeared through the door and the simulated office faded, leaving Director Washington sitting before a desk in a larger room void of decoration. Esther liked Tom and she was willing to pay top dollar for him, but she wouldn't let the broker know that. She sat back, touched her chin with her folded fingers, and sighed.

A VR image of the broker appeared before her. "So, what did you think?"

Director Esther Washington would not be rushed. Dr. Tom Hackett was legendary. Too bad he had died six months ago. Thank God a few weeks before the accident Tom backed up his life recording. Tom's widow had given the Agency the right to animate the recording as a VeRAI—a fitting move for its creator. His widow and her three-year-old son would receive eighty-three percent of his salary after taxes, if he was hired.

"Would you like more time?"

Esther stood. "No. We want him." She locked eyes with the broker. "Drop your asking price by thirty-five percent and we'll take him on a six month renewable contract."

The broker hesitated, his lower lip quivering but not forming words.

"You know who I work for. Chin Shu Industries believes this first copy of the Hackett VeRAI will satisfy our initial needs. If so, we will be back for more of him."

"But, Dr. Washington, multiple VeRAI copies are illegal."

Esther smiled. "This is China … exceptions will be made. Reduce the price by thirty-five percent. This is our final offer." She bowed to the broker.

The broker's image faded.

Esther headed for the door and paused. This would be the first VeRAI employee. What if they started replacing all employees with VeRAI replicates? It would be a win-win for everyone. They would retire early on part-salary, and Chin Shu Industries would have a workforce that never tired. Esther left the room, and the lights faded.

The End

After graduating with degrees in Theology and Electrical Engineering, Darrell embarked on his career as an electrical engineer, school director, landlord, and father of six. In an effort to prove that the need for sleep is an illusion, he strives to fulfill his dream of writing novels for the "Epi Epic."

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At last, he raised his finger. "Very well, where did you get it?"

"Get what?" Lyonis asked desperately.

The man's little eyes considered him. He spoke very slowly, as if Lyonis might be a little stupid. "The ring. The ring with the seal."

At these words, Lyonis knew what the man meant, but the knowledge only confused him further. He failed to see why this guard would be interested in that ring, in a wedding present from his stepfather, a kindly old metalsmith who worked at the temple.

For several seconds the question and answer lay between them like a dead weight. "He has nothing to do with this."

"No?" The jailor looked first incredulous, then thoughtful. "I hope you are right for his sake, but you must understand, we will need to question your friend. For one thing, how can you be sure he has nothing to do with this since you have no idea what this is?"

"I know because he could not possibly be involved in anything that would place a newly-wedded man in prison because of his signet ring."

"Your signet ring," the man said, his voice laced with sarcasm, as if Lyonis had said something outrageous, as if he had just claimed ownership over the sun in the sky.

"Yes," Lyonis said. "That is the ring you mean, is it not? I have no others. It is not customary among the men of my native people to wear them." He looked down at his bare finger, thinking how the past few months had so acclimated him to its presence. He never took it off, not even to bathe, and he felt its absence now, felt the ghost of a ring on his finger.

"So why did you choose to acquire one?"

This seemed like a safe enough question, but he was already beginning to feel as if inch by inch he was giving too much away, as if perhaps the best course would have been to say nothing at all. "It was a gift," he said simply. "A wedding gift."

"I see. From the man who has nothing to do with any of this."

Lyonis saw the error of his mistake and he groaned audibly. All wedding gifts and the names and occupations of the donors had been submitted along with the marriage papers. He remembered because he had thought it was one of the most foolish things he had ever heard, that a man must account to his kingdom for the gifts of his marriage union. With a shudder, he realized that somewhere on that written list an investigator would easily find the words gold ring, handmade by bride's father, Talan, approximate value of gold ten sheereak, twelve sisten.

"You know," the jailor said, "it is only a matter of time until we find out this man's identity. We have already confiscated all your records and it will be a matter of minutes to find the gift list." He paused to allow Lyonis time to think about this, as if he had not already had more than enough. "So if there is anything you want to tell us, now would be the time."

"What is this about?"

His jailor shrugged. "I suppose it will do you no harm either way to tell you that the seal it bore was a forgery."

A forgery? Lyonis almost laughed, almost told the man that he was being stupid. The ring had been handmade by his stepfather, and no sane man would bother to copy the seal of a foreigner. Then he realized what the man meant, what he must mean. The seal he bore resembled another seal, evidently that of someone very important. He felt his heart begin to beat faster and harder.

"That is impossible."

"Of course, if you had known, you would not have used it to mark your transfer of ownership papers and you certainly would not have left a copy at the local registrar's. But you

would be surprised to know how often such fortuitous events occur. Never underestimate man's capacity for stupidity."

"There must be some misunderstanding," Lyonis said, realizing how stupid that sounded. But he had seen the old blacksmith working night after night on the ring; the entire temple had known that Talan and no other had made it. So what was the explanation? "Perhaps it is just a coincidence. Lions must be a fairly common decoration."

"Perhaps," the man said.

Finally, he thought of another question he should ask. "Whose is the original?"

At this, his jailor turned away, tiny eyes bunching with rage. "You would like to know that, wouldn't you? I believe we will talk again tomorrow."

* * *

Talan had lived in the temple of Isis for nearly his entire life, having been left there by his anonymous mother when he was still a child. There, he had wed a priestess and fathered a single daughter, who herself had been initiated into the mysteries as soon as she turned fifteen. While the temple was not part of the official religion, it had both good relations and a personal stake in the current regime. No one could long consider the possibility that he was a spy.

Still, questions had to be asked, mysteries to be explored, reams of reports to be made.

Although Talan's hair had turned white, he had lost none of it and kept it in a short ponytail tied with a red ribbon at the back of his head. The lines of his face and its sagging wrinkles did little to diminish his proud jaw and wide, dark eyes. He still had all of his teeth and carried himself with pride and self-possession.

Even sitting in the chair, listening with polite attention to the accusations and explanations made by the guard, he seemed large, to be reckoned with. "Let me see," he said at last. "You are asking me if I made the ring myself because it looks like someone else's. I made it under the direction of the Goddess who inspires all my creations. I am Her hands."

The guard was bored. He had been sitting there for two hours listening to variations of these same words. "You have never seen any imperial materials?"

Talan sat forward so abruptly that the floor beneath them shuddered. "The imperial seal? I see. Dear Goddess."

"So you have seen it?" the guard said, relaxing a little, thinking perhaps that the man might be a little senile, a little prone to forget the source of his design. But then he remembered what he had been told by the palace representative. Forgeries were many and most were not very good, but there were marks on the original ring, marks on the edges, and other identifying marks that would not appear when pressed into hot wax. Only someone who had seen the original, seen and studied it, could have copied all of those marks. That was what made this so unusual – part of what made it so unusual at least.

"No," Talan said. "But I feel in my heart that it is so. In the same place where my Goddess shows me how things can be made, I feel that this ring is identical to the one belonging to the emperor." Upon saying this, Talan looked for a few seconds like a small child might look. "But why? What does that mean?"

The guard, not in the mood for philosophical or mystical questions, felt tempted to yell at the old man, to ask how on earth he was supposed to know. Instead, he said, "If there is nothing else you can tell me, I will be forced to bring this reply before the emperor."

The next day, Lyonis returned home, but the guard who delivered Ariana's husband also brought a message. It was written on white parchment, the red wax binding paper to paper

imprinted with a seal that looked exactly like her husband's. Her father opened it in their presence and read aloud.

"His most sovereign lord, the emperor of the middle kingdom, sends word through his servant, the chief scribe, that Talan, servant of the Goddess Isis, has one year in which to construct a ring proving his ability to know what exists beyond his own eyes. The picture upon the seal must be identical to a picture known only to the sovereign emperor. If Talan fails then both himself and the temple which harbors him must be expunged from the land." Talan let the parchment slip from his fingers and the seal hit the ground with a soft clunk.

"Father," Ariana said, "what will we do?"

"It is not what we will do, my daughter. Leave me alone for a while."

* * *

Over the next several months, Talan prayed and received many visions but none of them showed him the ring. The emperor appeared to be in no hurry, but once a month a messenger appeared to ask if the ring was ready. With each passing month, Ariana and Lyonis became more concerned, even as Talan felt a strange peace gripping him ever more tightly. When a year had passed a messenger came with a guard of five soldiers saying that his time was up.

He had spent the past two weeks on the ring and had known even before he began that it was not what the emperor had drawn. Talan knew it as surely as he had known that the signet ring was a copy of the one the emperor held, as surely as the air he breathed.

* * *

The palace was grander than anything Talan had ever seen. They were permitted without question to pass through the tall iron gates, which stood before the even higher brick wall separating the palace from prying eyes and crafty hands.

Once on the grounds, Talan's senses were immediately assaulted by the many people, dressed in rich silks, gathered around an ornamental pool, listening to a musician play a stringed instrument he had never seen before. The musician wore plain brown clothes, drab but for the skillful fingers working the long-necked instrument laid across his knee, bridge inches from his right cheek, eyes closed in concentration. As they walked by, one of the young ladies dressed in red silk turned to look at Talan and he felt himself blush fiercely at the contact of eyes. She smiled at him before turning to her companion and saying in a low voice, "That is the man who made the seal. A cute old thing, isn't he?"

They were past before he could hear the other woman's response.

They walked beyond ornamental bushes, shaped to look like birds and animals of various kinds, coming at last to a building made of black marble.

A black door opened into a room of incongruously white marble, where three large golden chairs with red cushions faced another doorway, masked by a thick red curtain hanging from large gold hoops. "Please have a seat," the escort said, before going through the curtain.

Talan sat in the nearest chair. He knew what he had in his pocket, knew its worth, but for the first time in that context it occurred to him that not merely his own life was at stake. What if this failed and his daughter, his sweet daughter, paid for it with her life? And what of the new life growing even now inside her?

"Dear Goddess," he said in a low voice, "I know that in eternity such things may matter little, but in this time your temple and your servant's family matters to me." He could think of

nothing else to say and sat in silence for an uncounted length of time before another man came through the curtain and announced, "The Emperor will see you."

Gathering his courage and his wits, Talan stood and said, "Thank you."

Although the servant parted the curtain for him, Talan entered alone, finding himself in a room little larger than the one he had just left but gilt with gold along the walls and ceiling and carpeted in red cloth. Three stairs on the other side of the room led up to a golden throne where the emperor himself sat dressed in golden and red robes. Talan could not bear to look at the face, but despite himself caught a fleeting glance of black hair arranged elaborately around a golden crown and a small oval face. Otherwise, he kept his eyes on the golden robes traced with red symbols he did not recognize and on the stairs where he decided he would stop and kneel, which he did.

"So you have brought it?" a voice asked from above his head.

"Yes, emperor."

"Show it to me."

He reached into his pocket and brought out the small box. He was about to hand this over but instead decided to open it and take out the ring. Although it meant looking more closely at the emperor than he wished to, he could not stop looking at the ring. Even as the emperor's hand grasped it, he wondered what it might mean, why the Goddess had shown him this. As he watched the face of the ring, he saw beyond it the face of the emperor, not that of a god, but of a man, a man not so different from himself, well-aged but undeniably old.

The new ring looked much like the old in its overall design. In the center a slim object looked on one side like a shaft of wheat and on the other like a sword. The same face in profile gazed outward on both sides. On one side it bore the expression of a sweet matron, strong yet serene, and on the other that of the warrior, bold and expectant.

The emperor's voice was unreadable as he said, "Machev, bring me a candle now, a lit candle."

A young man about Lyonis' age entered the room from another to the right of the throne, a tall candle in a silver candleholder clasped in his hand. He bowed before the emperor, offering the candle. Talan heard the emperor whisper, "See to it that we are not overheard," as he took the candle from his servant's grasp.

Machev exited through a door at the opposite side of the room. The emperor waited for some time, staring at the ring as if transfixed. "Stand and I will show you what I drew."

Talan stood, still not daring to look upon the emperor's face.

The emperor held out a sealed sheet of parchment and Talan saw the seal with a shudder of recognition: two rampant lions facing away from a sword. Then the emperor cracked the seal and showed him the picture. The first thing Talan saw was a blade much like the one on the royal seal with a broad handguard and wide blade. It was lying across a broad red banner with the letters L and A etched upon it in purple letters.

At the sight of this Talan's heart began to beat faster. He had been hoping that it would at least bear some similarity to the seal he had created. He was silent and for a time the emperor was as well, staring at the seal.

After considerable time, the emperor asked, "That woman, she is supposed to be your Goddess?"

"Two of her faces," Talan said softly. Warming to the topic, he added, "She has many faces, even as this world has many aspects."

The emperor did not respond. Instead he resealed the paper and reached to the side of his throne where a candlestick stretched toward the ceiling. Lifting the candle, he brought the flame

to the wax until it had softened. He used the ring to mark the parchment. "No man will open this while I live. I think I understand that your Goddess wished me to see this, to see Her face and receive some comfort in my old age. I thank you."

What was the emperor thanking him for?

"I would like to tell you a story," the emperor said. "It will not take long, but it is one you must never repeat, just as you must never reveal the details of the seal you created. If you will do this, both you and your people will be rewarded for as long as I can assure it."

Despite himself, Talan looked up and saw strong emotions, regret and remembrance mingled. The emperor looked back at him and for a second, only a second, Talan saw an aging man not much younger than Talan and far more worn by the weight of his years. Both horrified and amazed, he looked down at the hem of the emperor's robe. "I swear it, my sovereign."

"I was the youngest son of the emperor's first wife, the empress. The second and third wives conspired against her because she was a foreigner and much resented. One day while my father was at the baths in Nantong they had assassins come and slaughter all of her children. Unbeknownst to the assassins, a guard managed to substitute another child for the youngest son of the empress, for me.

"After all had settled and the emperor returned from the healing springs, where he was at the time, the wives presented a tale of what had happened, something probable but put to the lie when the guard presented me to my father. He recognized me, and after hearing all there was to say, had the two wives put to death as traitors.

"The bodies of the other children had been disposed of, or so I am told, and it was considered unseemly for young women to be painted." The emperor touched the seal as if he could not believe it, as if it were something holy. "As much as I missed all who died that day, I missed my eldest sister the most. I dream about her often, how she used to sing me to sleep at night, to study lines with me, and to this day I have never understood why she had to die. They told me that someday I would." The emperor stroked the face of the ring before handing it back to Talan. "I think this is as close as I will ever come to that answer."

Talan accepted the ring, unsure of what to say. "After all these years you remember her?"

He might have imagined it but he thought he heard a note of humor in the voice of the emperor. "I am getting old and if it is only a dream, then I thank you for that dream."

"If this is the face of the sister you remember then you should have it."

"No. This way her face will be seen, and all who see it will know only that they look upon the most beautiful woman who ever existed beneath the sun."

Talan felt himself flush at the words, all too aware that his hands had shaped this face. "I do not know what to say, my lord."

"Say nothing. Only be sure that your family and the seal you carry descends through the ages and let that be your thanks. Then I can join my ancestors in peace."

The End

Anne Doucette lives in Ohio with her husband, cat, and dog. Her fiction has appeared online in Eternity and Jack-hammer E-zine. Her fantasy novel, The Dark Circle is available online.

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Then my harp-player can be a servant at table, too.

"You and you," he said. "I want you to go and pick me flowers in the jungle."

They stared at him. Then they stared at each other. It was a coveted task among the slaves, since it meant they would be excused all other work for light duties, and could walk through the jungles for up to an elevenday, plucking flowers and pretending they were free. It was usually given to slaves much more obedient than either Taerlian or Ria had ever shown themselves to be.

It would also give them a chance to be alone together, and they would be surrounded by flowers and birds—all the sights and magic of the southern summer. Altalion thought he could count on those to stir up the passions that they seemed disinclined to indulge on his estate. Ria might even be pregnant by the time they returned.

"Go on now," he said, and watched them go benevolently. They wouldn't run away, of course. He had a link to Ria's Scarlet magic through his mastery of the Cycle that would let him draw her back anytime. Taerlian, who had no magic, was even more vulnerable to the stone-fey's Crop magic and could be crushed from any distance if Altalion concentrated hard enough. Altalion was fairly confident that neither of them wanted to die, or they would have slain each other already.

He turned back to his interrupted tablet, then sighed as he stepped over broken glass. Yes, he would have to have that repaired, and soon.

* * *

"Any other news?"

Altalion beamed at the man who knelt on the floor. Just a slave among slaves, he seemed to the others, but he got to come in among the stone-fey and share in the art, luxuries, and fine food for a few hours each elevenday in return for reporting anything curious or suspicious or adorable that the other slaves did. Altalion usually found them adorable, those cute little attempts at rebellion that would get the humans nowhere.

"Ria is calling herself Queen now," said the informer.

Altalion laughed in genuine amusement, making the informer flinch; stone-fey laughter evidently sounded like clashing rocks to humans. "Just like our Queen in the Palace," he murmured. "And what does she say she's Queen of?"

"Riondia," the informer said, frowning in concentration as he remembered the name. "The southern jungle lands. And every human who lives in them."

"Which is none of them, of course, permanently," said Altalion. "How wonderful that she wants to imitate her betters. She must be pregnant, to indulge such childish passions." He waved the informer away and stared into the flames for a little while, considering how best to reward Ria for doing her duty.

* * *

Altalion woke with a scowl and a headache that ran all along the top of his horns and knobs. He'd been feeling that way for the last three days, ever since Taerlian and Ria had settled into some sort of domestic tranquility. Rubbing the knobs on the sides of his head, which hurt most, he wondered if he actually missed their arguments. But they had ceased for the best of reasons, of course. Ria was pregnant, and talking with such charming passion of freedom for

her child. Taerlian must have decided that he had better stop glaring at his wife, that the child should bind them. Perhaps he was even in love with her.

Altalion grinned, despite the headache, as he walked to the window. Humans. As if they knew what love was. But the mixture of lust and loneliness they mistook for it was entertaining.

He let his faceted eyes sweep over the fields, carved out of the jungle long ago and held fiercely against its return. Here the slaves worked, some sowing, some tending half-tame plants, some herding, some washing their clothes and tending children and the other necessary tasks of looking after humans. The rest would be engaged with the stone-fey in sculpting the land with water and wind and fire, to make it look more decorative. The necessary tasks for the stone-fey themselves were all done inside the house, of course, and only at the hands of a very few trusted servants.

Altalion continued looking, still rubbing his temples. He thought the headache came from disturbances among the slaves, but he didn't know why. He was master of the magic of every one of them, every Azure and Scarlet and Gust mage there was on his estate. None of those elements could much hurt a stone-fey anyway, but if they had tried a serious uprising he would have known. Just *known*. Not gotten a headache from it.

Headaches weren't amusing.

Then he smiled as he saw Ria stalk out of the house that she and Taerlian shared, and start making some speech. Something about freedom and new magic, and how they were all going to work together and rise up. His headache faded away as he listened, even when he noticed Taerlian staring at him determinedly, insolently, as if he knew Altalion's mood and wanted to spoil it. The plans would never work, but what a dazzling creature Ria was, in her own way. If she wasn't pregnant, he would consider making her his jester.

He felt no threat, of course. What threat could there be? They didn't know about the informers.

* * *

Altalion only shook his head as the bodies of ten slaves were dragged away. A tragic accident. They'd been assigned herding duty that morning, all of them at once, and had herded the cattle beneath one of the promontories that most stone-fey left as decorations on their estates. The rocks had fallen abruptly, probably the result of long shifting and settling in place, and crushed the herders beneath them.

Oh, well. There were always more. The children in Ria's belly and in the bellies of several other women were a promise of that future. And Altalion didn't have any land-sculpting he wanted completed at once. Twenty years was a small time to wait. The children might even be strong enough to help at fifteen.

The accident remained on his mind throughout the day for some reason, though, and only later did he realize that all ten of his informers had died. He paused, thought about examining the site of the accident for a startled moment, and then laughed.

Of course, it was only coincidence. How could it not be? No Azure, Scarlet, or Gust mage had any power over rocks. Only the stone-fey did.

* * *

"My lord! My lord!"

"What is it?" Altalion yawned, looking down at the minor stone-fey functionary he'd assigned to keep track of the slaves. It would have been a slave ordinarily, but for some reason none of them wanted to become informers yet. Altalion supposed that they must be superstitious, since so many of the well-treated servants had died in the rock accident a month ago. A few more years should bring them around.

"The slaves are rebelling!" The functionary looked hopelessly at him. "Eratlian and Pelcorran are already dead."

Altalion rolled his eyes. "They can't really be dead," he said, rising and making his way to the window. As expected, he drew the curtains back on a scene of fires, and flash floods, and trees swaying in the winds. He shook his head. This happened every few decades. The slaves just needed to blow off some energy, realize how hopeless their rebellion was, and they would be back in business. Besides, some interesting land-sculpting always resulted from the rebellions. "The slaves don't possess the magic to kill a stone-fey."

He smiled as he noted one of the servants who worked in the house running for the gong that would send a vibration through the earth under the slaves' feet and lay them out unconscious. "You see?" he added. "It will all be over in a minute."

The servant abruptly flipped end-over-end, her head smashing into the ground with startling violence. At the same moment, Altalion felt every bone in her body shatter.

He felt it. He *felt* it. The magic had come through the earth—even though no human had Crop magic, and no stone-fey would have done that.

He spun around, wondering what the humans were playing at, just in time to see Taerlian step through the door. His remarkable blue eyes were burning with triumph, and Ria, at his side, carried herself as if she really were a Queen, not playing at being one.

"What is the meaning of this?" Altalion asked.

"Told you he would say that," Ria exulted to Taerlian.

"Shut up, Your Majesty," said Taerlian as he faced his master. "We are rising. By dawn we shall be free and declaring the kingdom of Riondia."

"Really, this is too much for games," said Altalion flatly. He wanted to smile, but a servant had died. This was serious. "You will have to be beaten, perhaps killed. When your wife has had my harp-player, of course."

"It is not a game," said Taerlian, lifting a hand. A yellow glow surrounded him. But no magic was yellow, Altalion thought in confusion. Not human magic, at least. "I command the Crop, the newest element to join the Cycle, and I will destroy you now."

"That's impossible. Only stone-fey have Crop magic."

And Altalion knew it was, even as he crumbled into rubble and lay on the floor, so many small stones. He saw the same thing happen to his functionary, and he felt it happen, all over his estate, to other stone-fey. And he could feel it on other estates, too, each of which seemed to have some of these self-proclaimed Crop mages hiding among the slaves. Ria was laughing now, and saying something about how they had waited until those mages could have proper training.

But it was impossible, of course. It really and truly was. No human could challenge the stone-fey on their own ground. That meant that this was just a game. He would be reassembled in a moment, and learn which of his neighbors was playing the prank, and have a good laugh about it.

He was confident that it would be so.

Ria and Taerlian were speaking of the Kingdom of Riondia as they walked away, and the birth of their child as the royal heir. Altalion would have shaken his head if he had a head left to

shake. *Humans. Such children, really.*

It was a game.

* * *

Several thousand years later, when the worn-down Rashalamantarion Mountains bore another, human name, and there were Crop mages walking everywhere, and he still lay in pebbles on the floor of an overgrown house, with no sign that it had ever been different, Altalion was forced to concede that he might, just might, have been wrong.

The End

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managed to talk his way free, despite their distrust of the Shae.

A loud *scree* announced the arrival of a red-feathered hawk that lighted down on Xenon's leather bracer. The Wolfsman caressed the bird's plumage and fed it a morsel from his pouch before taking the tiny cylinder from its claw. One of the other Wolfsmen broke the seal and twisted it open, then unrolled the tiny missive. Thealos rubbed his jaw and watched them. They wore subdued tones and colors without protective armor like hauberks or shields. Most wore their hair long and braided, festooned with red strips of leather or cloth to mark their order. They spoke with their hands as much as their mouths and carried weapons of the highest quality and make—longbows made of pale white yew wood and tassled with silver, short swords with leaf-shaped blades that thrummed the air with Silvan magic, short spears and belted daggers as well.

The one Wolfsman finished perusing the contents. "*Nordain wants the Kilshae boy brought in at night to avoid attention*," he said in Silvan and wrinkled his nose. "*Politicians—they make me sick. What does it matter who witnesses his shame? The trial will begin the next morning before the Council of Elders.*"

"*That will give the Sunedrion enough time to begin debating,*" Xenon said and chuckled. "*It would save a lot of time if they just prepared a cell now.*" Turning his head, he gave Thealos a small smile. "*But with such excitement these days, it would be best to see this handled fairly. And none may argue that our Lady Silverborne is fair.*" The others joined in with laughter at his play on words. "*You may have gray hairs before you see the light of Eroth again, boy. That is a long time indeed.*"

Thealos held his tongue. Granted, his mouth hurt a great deal from the gag, but it had gotten him into trouble in the first place. He still remembered what he had said to the Council Elder of Vannier the night he had fled Avisahn. It amounted to treason if taken literally, though it was only an outburst of anger and frustration that he had been goaded into making. So hollow now after everything he had suffered in the Shoreland. He had nothing to show for his journey either. Not the Silverkin. Not even a stub of Everoot. Memories were all he had left. The memories were painful.

Xenon stroked the bird's neck. "*Put this in the reply.*" He waited while the other Wolfsman drew a small slip of thin paper and a stylus. "*One day from Avisahn. Will cross at Moonwell and arrive from the south as ordered. No sign of the Sleepwalker.*"

The other two Wolfsmen stretched to loosen their muscles and practiced some strange grabbing techniques that looked vaguely familiar to Thealos. They were movements similar to those he had seen Jaerod do. The magic of their weapons sang to his blood, making him crave the blade he had lost in Landmoor. He was weaponless and helpless. Within the next day or so, he would be across the river and surrounded by those who hated him. Would he be given a chance to see his family again? He missed his sister, and the memory made his side ache. How would his parents feel about him now? His Correl and Sorrel were furious when he elected not to choose a calling—he was certain they would still be. But he also imagined that they would be worried as well. Contrition was not one of the emotions churning inside him. No, he should have left Avisahn sooner.

The reply message was rolled and inserted into the small whistle-like case tethered to the hawk. Xenon shrugged his arm and the creature took to flight to deliver the message.

It was while the hawk swooped upwards that the familiar prick of awareness went down Thealos' spine, sending a shiver of gooseflesh down his arms.

Xenon must have seen the look in his eyes, because the Wolfsman drew his elegant leaf-

blade, gazing around the grove.

"*He is here,*" Xenon said in warning. One of the other Wolfsmen went to Thealos and clamped a hand on his shoulder, forcing him to kneel. The other three surrounded him as well, blades at the ready.

Thealos saw him first.

There was a flicker of movement in his side vision. He turned and looked there, but he saw nothing save the trees and featherfern. But he knew Jaerod was there, looking at him. He wiped his mouth again, feeling the soreness.

"Come, Sleepwalker," Xenon said, using the language of the king's common instead of Silvan. "Why reveal yourself now? There are other quaeres waiting for us. If it takes a hundred, we will hunt you down. You are a fool to strike us so near Avisahn."

"A fool I may well be," came the reply. The four Wolfsmen turned to the source of the sound—a man in a black cloak approaching from behind a stunted elm. "But who is the greater fool, really? I suppose we will wait and see."

"I have no doubt it is you, Sleepwalker," Xenon said. "I have been waiting for you. We have expected you would try to free the boy. The other quaeres are coming. They see you, Sleepwalker. They see you right now. There is nowhere you can take him that we can't find you. There is no safe haven for either of you."

Thealos felt a pinch of worry. He watched Jaerod draw near, until he could see the cynical twist of his mouth despite the shadow cast by the deep cowl. The Sleepwalker wore black from head to boot, a loose tunic belted at the waist and sturdy pants that made no sound as he approached.

"Let him go," Jaerod said.

Xenon lowered and tensed, dropping into a strong stance as he faced off with the Sleepwalker. "I don't think so."

Two of the other Wolfsmen positioned themselves separately. The final Wolfsman stood at Thealos' back, one hand digging into his clothes.

Thealos felt the presence of Silvan magic grow stronger around them. Other quaeres were rushing in quickly. He stared at Jaerod, willing him to move—to do something.

He did.

Thealos did not see Jaerod strike. It was only a blur of black and then Xenon fell, struck in the temple and jerked off his feet to land with a crash. Jaerod was on the right then, moving like the wind as another Wolfsman slashed and stabbed at him with a blazing short sword. In a blur, the Sleepwalker had moved farther, spinning around the man to strike the Wolfsman clutching Thealos. It was like watching a raven swoop and dance, pecking at crickets. Thealos' shirt jerked backwards and he fell as well.

Thrashing against his bonds, he rolled to the side as the Wolfsman almost trampled him in his haste to get to his feet. Thealos brushed his hair out of his eyes and watched the Sleepwalker exchange a flurry of attacks and blocks with one of them. Punch caught, deflected, re-attack parried, blow after blow, hit after hit. The Wolfsman tried kicking Jaerod's knee, but the man was too quick to pin down, too deft to subdue. It was like watching someone fight the wind.

The Wolfsman snarled with pain and went down. A loud snapping sound followed and the Shae was left writhing and seething in the scrub. Two attacked Jaerod at once while Xenon shrugged himself to his feet. Thealos felt the prickle of calm down his back again, as if to warn him to stay put. A fist met one of the Wolfsmen in the face, dropping him to the ground.

Xenon lunged at Jaerod but did not attack as wildly as he had that night in the streets

of Sol. He was careful, more deliberate, and Thealos knew what he was doing. Hold the Sleepwalker there until the next quaere could arrive. There were limits to any man's endurance.

As if to answer that thought, four more Crimson Wolfsmen bounded into the grove of elm, as silent as shadows.

"You cannot take us all, Sleepwalker. We were waiting for you."

A prickle of earth magic fluttered in the air as Jaerod struck Xenon in the chest with both palms. The Crimson Wolfsman went down a second time, thrown up and backwards so that he crashed into an elm hard enough to rattle its branches.

Jaerod whirled and faced the next quaere.

Thealos brought himself up to a half-crouch, ready to run if Jaerod asked it. He licked his lips, watching Jaerod hungrily, wondering what gave him such power against the best trained warriors of Avisahn. His movements were too quick to follow, his attacks short, precise, and effective.

Another Wolfsman went down. In the end, they all did.

Thealos stared at Jaerod as he stood alone, his hands poised in front, his body rotating this way and that, listening and sensing and ready to continue the fight. Sweat dripped off his chin. He turned and looked at Thealos, the gray eyes pointed and almost accusing. As if they said—*look what I had to do because of you.*

Straightening, Thealos stepped forward and held up his bonds for Jaerod to cut with a small knife. The long tapered blade the Sleepwalker normally wore at his side was gone.

His hands tingled and stung as blood rushed back through the chafed and swollen marks on his wrists. "Your sword…where is it, Jaerod?"

"The Sorian destroyed it when I faced her. I'm glad I didn't have it though—I'd have been too tempted to use it this time." He wiped his face and breathed heavily for a few moments. "I wish I did not have to do that," he said with a sigh.

Thealos touched Jaerod's shoulder. "I wish I *could* do that."

"Do you?" His smirk became very bitter.

"I wish to be a Sleepwalker, Jaerod. I want you to teach me."

"But there is no time to teach you right now." Jared looked heartsick. "There is so little time." His eyes widened. "There are more. We must go."

Thealos felt the presence of Silvan magic growing stronger. Some of the Wolfsmen started to stir as well.

"Where? To Safehome?"

Jaerod shook his head. "No…not yet. Stand near me." Thealos did and Jaerod gripped his shoulders. "Accept the Earth magic. Let it touch you. Let it take you."

Thealos held his breath and closed his eyes as the magic swirled around him.

* * *

At first, the magic felt like being thrown in the midst of an ice-cold lake. It was a familiar feeling, so he did not panic as he had when he had felt it down in the catacombs below Landmoor in the lair of the Silverkin. His mind and body wanted to fight against it, for the feelings were akin to drowning. Something inside him, a core part of his being, ripped loose. There was the sensation of movement, of flying. This had happened to him during the foretelling when he had entered the small sacred room enclosed in a Silvan warding. He opened his eyes and found himself clutched by Jaerod, like a man dragging a friend through a blizzard, and that they both

were walking. Yet they were walking faster than the hawks. It caused a dizzying feeling in the pit of his stomach that grew stronger and stronger. He had to shut his eyes to keep from losing all sense of himself.

It ended as quickly as it started, the surging feel of magic replaced by deep darkness. Thealos collapsed and would have landed on his face had Jaerod not been holding him so tightly. The Sleepwalker eased him down to his knees where Thealos flopped forward and emptied his stomach. Three rounds of the nausea racked his body and left him shaken and weak.

"You'll need to eat," Jaerod said in a quiet voice.

Food was the last thing he craved. He looked back up at the Sleepwalker and wiped the cold sweat from his brow. "Does this happen to you?"

Jaerod smiled. "Not any more. Eat this."

Thealos took a small loaf of spiced pumpkin-bread and nibbled on it. It gave him back his strength in morsels. It was after nightfall and darkness cloaked them in shadows. Trees surrounded them, but there were lights painting the sky as if a great city was nearby.

"Where are we?"

"The gardens behind Silverborne palace."

Thealos sat up, his eyes widening with shock. "Jaerod!"

The Sleepwalker gave him a wry grin. "It is the last place they will think to look for us. I need rest and so do you. Walking the Crossroads is exhausting." He settled down nearby and pulled out another small loaf, starting on it himself.

Thealos was pleased to see Jaerod, but he wanted to talk to him. He had been fighting his feelings for days. He was weary of wrestling against despair. "I failed, Jaerod. Down in the tunnels. I didn't get the Silverkin."

"I know."

Silence.

"What does that mean though? Do we have another chance? Can we have another chance? If I had you with me, I would have been able to take it. But at the time…"

"I already know, Thealos. Allavin and Ticastasy told me everything." Thealos nearly interrupted him, but the Sleepwalker gripped his shoulder. "Please. I'm tired, Thealos. They are both safe and waiting for you in the Shoreland." He took another bite from the bread and chewed it slowly, sighing. Thealos kept quiet and ate as well.

Questions churned inside his mind. How could he ask them all? Images from the Foretelling flickered through his memory. The continent of Sol-don-Orai and the devastation caused by the Everoot. The blood shed by the armies fighting to control it. He remembered images of the Shae kingdom as it had once been. And the city in the clouds that had come to offer the talisman that would save them. Safehome—not a city of myth that would return for the Shae. A city that had, as Jaerod said in Castun, never left.

"Much better," Jaerod said, finishing off the meal with a cool drink from a flask. He offered it to Thealos, who accepted and drank the cool leathery-tasting water. "I imagine you want to know what happened when we parted. I'll answer you. But I have some questions first. You made it into the warding beneath Landmoor, didn't you?"

"I was given a Foretelling. But it said I would die and the Silverkin would be given to a Sorian. I…I chose not to take it for that reason."

"That was always a possibility. I had seen it in my Foretelling as well."

"Yours?"

"I had one before coming to this valley to find you. It set my feet on the path leading to this

point. But some of it does not make sense, even now. I was also supposed to find someone else—someone who would help defeat the Sorian."

Thealos leaned forward. "I thought that wasn't possible."

"I told you in Castun that only a Sorian could defeat another Sorian. But in my Foretelling, I saw a young man with Shae blood, though not a Shae, whom I was supposed to meet in Castun. I would recognize him if I saw him. He wore a patch over one eye."

"A patch? He's blind?"

"Not blind. He can see, but he does not understand what he sees. I searched the Shadows Wood and the surrounding lands for him. When I scouted the Bandit army, I searched among the prisoners for him. I waited in Castun as long as I dared. He never came." Jaerod shrugged. "But I must keep looking for him, Thealos. The Sorian must not control the Silverkin. If that happens, we fail."

"Do you know his name?"

"Did your Foretelling give you any names?"

Thealos wiped his face, feeling exhaustion seep inside him. "I have so many questions, Jaerod. But I'm having a hard time keeping my eyes open. What do we do now?"

"That's for you to decide, my friend. I've given you enough nudging. You know the dangers. You know the task. You must find a way to accomplish it."

"But surely you will come with me. I…I can't do it alone, Jaerod. I know that now."

"I'm glad you do. Now you know how I feel. I've mentioned before that many who start out following our order do not make it in the end. The Sorian want us dead. The Shae do not trust us, nor do the other religions of the humans. For some, the price is just too costly. They cannot give what it takes to earn the right to wear this medallion."

Jaerod hefted the medallion he wore and let the moonlight glimmer off its polished edge. It had always fascinated Thealos—the strange offset cross in an octagon. It was the symbol of Jaerod's order—an order, he claimed, that had originated with the Shae.

Thealos let his fingers graze the medallion and felt magic whisper from its touch. It was a quiet magic, a subdued magic that he could barely sense.

Jaerod smiled. "There are other magics, Thealos, than the ones you've been taught. This symbol is an ancient magic. It goes beyond this world to the world the Shae came from. The magics of this planet are kindred to it. But it is older and deeper. It is the Oath magic. You can see how the words themselves have evolved…have been lost. In this world, you say Earth magic. Such a subtle difference, isn't it? A small pronunciation twist and the meaning changes drastically. This medallion protects me from Firekin. But it comes at a great price."

"What is that price, Jaerod? What must I do to earn it?"

"What do you think? What does its name suggest?"

Thealos nodded and his eyes drooped. He pinched his hand and muttered a little curse. "I have never felt so weary. I must make an oath then? You know that the Shae do not enter oaths lightly."

"The founders of my order were Shae. My father, grandfather, and uncle were all part of it as well. In the Shae tongue, we are called *Ravinir*. Another interesting Silvan term."

"It is. The word *Ravin* has two meanings in Silvan," Thealos said. "It means literally 'to break is to be broken.' When we destroy something, we destroy a part of ourselves. It is a very difficult word for humans to understand. The nuances of it…"

"Are?"

"To be a *Ravinir*, you are a breaker…a destroyer. Yet you are also broken yourself."

He looked up at Jaerod and saw sadness in his eyes. The look was heartrending, so intensely personal that it clutched at Thealos' throat. "What is the cost you must pay, Jaerod?"

"The cost is the oath we take. The agony is in keeping it. Sleep, my friend. You'll need your strength. I'll watch over you while you rest."

"But I have so many questions. Please, can we talk a little longer?"

"You can hardly keep your eyes open. Think about what I have said. If you would be part of my order, you must be prepared to give away everything you hold dear. Even Avisahn."

The thought sent a pang through Thealos' heart. Give up his homeland? Forever? He looked at the Sleepwalker and felt the heaviness overwhelm him. "I've missed you, Jaerod."

A little smile in the darkness. "Go to sleep, Thealos."

Thealos stretched out on the cool grass and let the drowsiness take him.

* * *

Jaerod unbound the clasp that held his cloak closed and spread its warmth over Thealos as he lay sleeping. He stared at the young Shae's face. The mouth and nose—so like his mother's. He was a handsome young man. He had always been so. Jaerod sighed and patted his shoulder. So helpless now. So fragile in thought and sentiment.

Carefully, Jaerod knelt down in the grass, one knee up, and planted his right hand on the soft garden soil. He bowed his head and let the Oath magic swallow him up again, hiding himself from the eyes and ears of others.

"*Correl,*" he whispered in Silvan, though he did not need to. "*I have done as I was meant to do here. The boy's life is in your hands. I know the suffering that awaits him, Correl. Give him courage to face it. Give him strength to overcome it. Heal his heart when it is broken. It is such a hard thing he must do."* Jaerod paused, feeling the strangling pressure of the future. *"He is so young. So very young, Correl."*

Jaerod reached out through the magic and laid his hand on the back of Thealos' head. He watched a shiver run through his body.

After rising to his feet, the Sleepwalker left.

Chapter II

Exeres Tallin dreamed of a woman in a cage of gold and glass. It was a dream from his childhood, one that repeated itself often enough for him to remember the pecularity of its details. The woman was abandoned and lonely, sagging forgotten against a curving glass shield supported by ornate gold stays. The dream saddened him because he understood the loneliness of her prison. His father always said the recurring dream was trying to teach him something.

He awoke at dawn still clutching his blanket for warmth, the images of the dream still fresh in his mind. The wind invigorated him as he sat up and gazed at the massive cedars just south of where he had camped hidden in a copse of oak. Reaching over, he grabbed the gray cloth patch and covered his left eye—his blind eye—and made sure the band fit snugly. After rubbing his good eye with the back of his hand, he stood and stretched, kneading the stiffness from his shoulders and lower back. He twisted his neck until he felt it give a little snap and then sat down and pulled on his boots. The morning chill was sharp, making gooseflesh prickle down his arms. He grabbed his tunic, slid it over his head, and adjusted his medallion so that it hung exposed on his chest, marking him a Druid priest of the Zerite order. The cold made him examine the remains of the evening's fire, and he stirred the ashes with a stick. Placing a fresh log on the pile, he focused on the Earth magic, drawing it into the wood. Flames burst alive and started crackling.

As he stared at the healthy flames, he thought about her again—the woman in the cage. He couldn't really see what she looked like. At least not well enough to describe her. The details of the cage were vivid enough, but she had been a mystery his entire life. While he was awake, he remembered feelings more than anything. Without friends—without hope—full of despair. She was a symbol for something in his life, and he saw the similarities. He was like the woman he dreamed about. Both outcasts, both alone. Perhaps because of choice, or perhaps because of who they were. They could not fit into the world, and so the world had caged them with isolation. The world cared little for half-breeds. And cared even less for the blind.

Exeres was both.

Since he was born of a Human father and Shae mother, both societies shunned him. Was he more Shae than Man—or something different? People feared his milky white blind eye, so he suffered their rejection by wearing a patch. Their words still stung, even after so many years. *It wasn't natural. It wasn't right. It was a curse. Mixing with the Shae led to perversions like blindness.*

He blinked, trying to banish the memories of his childhood. His father was dead. All of the Druid lessons and journeys through the duchies—gone. Burned to smoldering ashes in a tiny village. Exeres had left the Yukilep and ventured east to the Druids of the Isherwood. He had never suspected his father to be capable of such deceptions. He was grateful that he had not been shunned completely from the order.

After eating a sparse meal of kettle rice flavored with onions and gnerric seeds, he cleaned

up his camp and carefully tended it. He stared at the fire that had warmed him and then drew the rest of its heat into himself, feeling the buzz and tingle of Earth magic beneath his skin. A small smile twisted his mouth. Memories were such honest tormentors. He thought of his father and his lessons in taming the Earth magic. His child's tongue could not describe the feelings that using the magic had brought to blossom inside him. His father did not understand what he was trying to say. But his Shae blood awoke every time he used it. It helped him excel at the lessons. Some day he would travel to Avisahn and seek to spend a season among his mother's people. Surely the Rules were not as austere as the Zerite oaths he had already taken.

When the camp was cleaned up, Exeres took up his walking staff, left the knot of trees, and went south to meet the border of the Shadows Wood. The Valley Druids already knew that the Bandit army had gathered there. He was one of the first that had been chosen to go and lend aid as a healer. He wondered why. Because of his skill or because his life did not matter as much? The Druids were impervious to external politics. The Zerites healed regardless of who had inflicted the injury.

The tall cedars rose like giant turrets in the distance ahead. The chill of the night quickly fled and the heat of the Inland plains soon had sweat soaking Exeres' shirt. He knew how to use the Earth magic to make himself more comfortable but did not want to tire himself out too quickly. If the rumors were true, the Bandits had already taken the city of Landmoor. There would be plenty of wounded and sick to attend to down there. He reached the woods and paused, staring at the majestic expanse of wilderness. It reminded him of the Yukilep, only hotter. Searching the grounds nearby, he paused to collect enough giant mushrooms, turtlelock, and thimbleberries to eat later. The woods spoke to him of health and vibrancy, but there was a harmful odor to them as well—a flavor that added a bitter sting to his Shae senses. He had no idea what it meant.

His mind wandered freely as he crossed into the woodlands. He thought back on the dream. It had come to him at least once a year for as long as he could remember. At first he had thought it was a dream about his mother, but his father had dispelled that assumption. In the dream, the woman's hair was gold, though it was always blurred by the glass, and Exeres' hair matched his mother's—a pale silver. His hazel eye came from her as well. The milk-white eye came from some unforeseen blight of fate that demanded cruelty accompany mischance. It was a curse that had plagued him as a child. He always wore the eyepatch. Always.

Perhaps if he had not been thinking so deeply, he would not have walked into the trap set by the Kiran Thall.

Exeres was struck from behind and found himself choking on pinescrub as the full weight of several men crushed him. Pain shot through his shoulder as someone grabbed his wrist and jerked his arm up and behind his back in a searing flash of pain.

"Got him! Lift him up! Watch for a knife…"

"This isn't him, you fools!"

Exeres felt his body groan as it was forced backwards and his throat raised up. A blade pressed against the slope of his throat.

"Bloody Hate, he's a priest!"

Dirt stung his good eye and he felt his patch had slipped down his face, which burned from scraping against the cedar scrub. Someone's elbow stunned his jawbone, sending spots of light into his eyes. The knife left his throat.

"Ban it, it's only a priest. I'd have sworn on my soul he was a Shae."

Exeres shook his head and struggled to open his eye again. His arms were held behind his

back and they forced him to stay on his knees.

"Speak up, lad. You're a Druid?"

"I'm a Zerite."

He tried to open his eye again, but could not because of the dirt or debris annoying the flesh. He was totally blind now.

"His hair is long enough to be Zerite. The complexion is a little weathered. Ban it, I'd have sworn he was Shae."

"My mother was a Shae. But I am a Zerite. I have no weapons."

Someone tugged at the Druid medallion and bent him forward. "We don't need the Zerites any more, do we Mordon? Not with the Root. Where are you from, boy?"

"I was sent by the Druids of Isherwood. I am on my way to Landmoor."

Someone snorted and the pain in his shoulder increased. "I don't think so, priest. We don't need the Zerites."

"The dying never say that," Exeres whispered. He bowed his head and drew in a little of the Earth magic to ease his pain. It welled up inside him, sparking sharp flavors and colors in his mind. The pain ebbed.

"What have you seen coming down from Isherwood, boy?"

"We are not spies," Exeres replied. "I am here to comfort the sick and ease the suffering."

"I asked you a question, boy."

Exeres was dumbfounded at the man's audacity. His mouth went dry. "I am here to comfort the sick and ease the suff…"

A knife went to his throat and he felt its edge slide across his skin.

"Last chance, boy."

The man was right. An arrow whistled from the woods and struck the soldier in the throat, from the sound of it. Exeres inhaled the Earth magic, drawing it into him like he had with the fire. The thrill of it exploded in his heart, but he tamed it quickly, focusing his mind not on enjoying it but on using it. He brought his arms around and together, infused with the strength of the stones and trees. The men holding him were powerless to stop him. Another arrow whistled from the woods and brought a second man down.

"Over there! Behind that one! It's Devers!"

Exeres was not sure who they were referring to. Reaching down, he felt on the ground for his walnut-wood staff and grasped it tightly. Coming up in a low stance, he swung it around and hammered a man in the lower back with it—right where one of his kidneys would be. He let the Earth magic be his eyes as he had always done. Dodging to his left, he felt a sword whoosh by his ear and brought the stick up to the man's armpit, along a certain line of sensitivity running along the arm. It would cause an immense amount of pain. Exeres did not fight to kill. He never did. But he knew right where to hit a man to bring him to his knees and take the fight out of him.

The sound of horses charging rushed through the woods as more soldiers joined the scene. Exeres brought another soldier down with a well-placed blow to his temple and summoned the Earth magic in a wash to frighten away the horses. He caused the air to smell of danger and fire and soon the animals were panicking and struggling against their riders. In his mind's eye, he could see another Kiran Thall go down, an arrow in his chest. He hated death in all its forms, but he accepted it as the natural order of the world. A brief spark of Life magic snuffed out, never to rise again. Exeres' staff snapped as he struck another man and so he tossed the weapon aside, using his hands next. His blindness had sharpened his other senses. He could hear on his blind

side and know danger coming. Drawing in more of the magic, he felt his strength bloom. He grabbed a soldier's arm, took the man off his feet and flipped him upside down before letting him fall. The snort and whine of startled horses echoed through the trees only slightly louder than the wailing of men.

A last arrow whooshed nearby, and someone collapsed while trying to flee.

Exeres rubbed and blinked the dirt from his good eye before tugging the patch securely in place. He looked around and saw the members of the Kiran Thall sprawled around the area. It saddened him, but he had not chosen to start the conflict. One of the soldiers writhed with pain, the arrow in his lower back. Exeres hurried over to the man and rested his palm on the man's shoulder.

"Hold still. You're only wounded."

The man had blood coming out of his mouth, but he writhed at his belt, trying to reach a wineskin or a pouch.

"Hold still. I'll heal you."

Steps approached and a hand clamped down on Exeres' shoulder. "He'll live, lad. Trust me. Better run while we can."

Exeres cocked his head and looked up at the man holding a longbow. He was a rugged-looking fellow with a short beard with flecks of gray. His woodsman garb had a different style than any custom or pattern that he was familiar with. A broad sword was belted to his side. He had brought down half a company of Kiran Thall by himself. Exeres had seen the Kiran Thall kill before.

"I appreciate your help, sir," Exeres replied and turned back to the wounded man. "But I'm a healer. I must…" Something caught his attention. A smell…a sharp bittersweet smell. A cloying smell. He looked up and saw one of the dead Kiran Thall sit up and shake himself off. It was the man who had taken the arrow in the throat. The smell of Earth magic grew thicker.

Other soldiers started twitching, and for the first time, fear began seeping into Exeres' stomach.

The woodsman hauled Exeres to his feet. "Hope you're strong enough to run, lad. Try and keep up."

Exeres looked down in time to see the Kiran Thall at his feet stuff something in his mouth under his tongue. The man's eyes rolled back in his head, glazing over with pleasure. The sickly sweet smell hit Exeres in the face again.

Another dead man rose.

Exeres had no problem keeping up with the woodsman.

Chapter III

With a quick tug and pull, Exeres cinched the last of the cloth bandage, tying it off in a tiny knot with expert hands. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and smelled the pungent aroma of the juttleberry salve staining his fingers. After looking down at the man he had bandaged, he gave him a pat of encouragement and then rose and moved to the next pallet in the crowded common room, nearly wall to wall with pallets loaded with the injured of Castun. The next man was some sort of wagoneer with a serious gash across his belly. Exeres cupped his hand over the man's forehead and felt the steady burn of a fever. This one probably wouldn't make it through the night.

He heard her bootsteps approach and he felt her presence before her shadow fell over him.

"You haven't stopped to eat anything," she said.

Exeres rubbed the skin beneath the patch on his right eye. "I know."

She came around him to meet his glance. Exeres looked up and tried to remember her name but failed.

"I brought you a tray. Take a nibble now and then. Keep up your strength, Zerite."

He looked up at her and saw compassion in her brown eyes. To nearly anyone else, she would have been fair. He realized that about people, but could not change what he saw. Others would see a young smile, dark hair, some steel beneath the softness. But to Exeres, she was as a maple tree in autumn, its leaves turning yellow or red before dropping lifeless to the earth. He could admire the splendour of its transition, but it was difficult looking at others who would die so soon—so *young* compared with the trees and mountains and rivers.

It was difficult to explain and he'd never done a good job at it. He could see Life magic seeping out of people with his blind eye. With humans, it seeped so quickly that it was watching a flower fade in moments. When he saw a Shae, he saw vibrancy and energy and life. Their magic seeped out ever so slowly. Compared to them, the trees were young.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" she asked, looking down at him, her eyes wary.

Realizing he had been staring, he shook his head and turned back to the fevered man. "I'm sorry. I suppose I'm more tired than I thought. Thank you for the help you've given this afternoon."

"The sun set two hours ago, Exeres. Maybe you should rest."

A discouraged smile twisted his mouth down. "Some of these won't make it through the night if I stop now. I'll keep going as long as I have strength."

"Let me help you then."

He shrugged and motioned for her to step around the pallet. This particular inn was the only one that still stood after the raid of the Kiran Thall on Castun. Smoke still lingered in the air, a scent that flavored every breath. The name of the inn also escaped his memory, but it was the place that Allavin Devers had brought him after they had escaped into the Shadows Wood. The memory of that moment still bothered him. The Kiran Thall had never dared attack a Zerite

before. Why their sudden arrogance? What magic had twisted them so much?

"First, remove the rags from his belly…" Exeres said. He paused and sunk his head. "I'm sorry, but I've forgotten your name already."

"Ticastasy. You're part Shae, aren't you?"

He nodded and watched the man flinch as she began stripping away the bloody rags he had used to stanch the wound. Exeres put pressure on the man's elbow just so, and then touched his neck at a pressure point. The man slumped still.

Ticastasy stared. "How did you do that?"

He smiled. "The body is an amazing thing. I can revive him as well, if he would want that. Let me see the wound…goodness, that is ugly. A little deeper and he'd have spilled his entrails and never made it here. Throw those rags on the floor and dip your hands in that pail over there. Very good."

While she went to the pail, Exeres withdrew some catgut thread and his stitching needle from his chirurgery packet and started suturing the wound.

Ticastasy returned, hands dripping.

"Don't dry them. It will help cleanse while you work. Hold his skin tight for me. Like this." He demonstrated for her and then waited as she mimicked what he had shown her. "Very good. Hold it tight while I go. You're quite good, Ticamasy."

"Ticastasy."

"I'm sorry. I really am terrible with names. How did you know that I had Shae blood? Have you seen many come this way?"

"No, I'm from Sol originally. The lamplight makes your eye glow. Also, the color of your hair is rare in humans even though you're as tanned as a woodsman. How did you lose your other eye?" She nodded towards the patch.

He bit his lip and studied the suture a moment. Most humans did not take him for a Shae at first because of the medallion he wore. But firelight always gave it away to the astute.

"I didn't lose it."

"But you're wearing a patch."

He looked up at her. "I was born blind in that eye. Never been able to see out of it. Here, take some of this juttleberry ointment and cover the wound with it. As thick as you like."

Ticastasy looked at him, her lip pursing. She snatched the little tub of ointment from his hand. "You don't have to lie to me, Exeres. If you don't want to say why you wear a patch, then don't say it."

He stopped and hung his head, wondering why she was making an issue out of it. "The explanation works well with most people. But you must know a lot of liars. Sorry if I offended you."

"I've been watching you all afternoon, Zerite. What you've done for these people is truly wonderful. You remind me of a…friend." Something about how she said the word snagged at his thoughts. More than a friend, obviously. He waited a moment for her to continue, confident that she would. She did.

"He was from Avisahn, and he helped save the life of my best friend." Her look darkened.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Exeres asked. "Why be so melancholy about it?"

She nodded. "I had sent for a Zerite to heal him because he'd been in a fight with some Kiran Thall. They say you priests can touch a man and bring his life back. Is that true?"

Exeres nodded. "We don't do it very often, because it hurts us. It takes part of our Life magic and feeds it into another. Did a Zerite come?"

She shook her head. “No, but my other friend came and healed him instead. With the Everoot.”

Exeres wadded up some more bandage and covered the man’s stomach with it. “I’ve never heard of that plant before. What is it again? Everoot?”

She rubbed her cheek, her eyes haunted with memories. “It’s like moss with little blue flowers. But it is Silvan magic. The Shae use it. It brought Flent back to life.”

He raised one of his eyebrows. The description sounded like a plant from the Druid histories—one that was known to be a terrible poison. “Hmmm. You don’t seem happy that he was cured.”

She looked down at her hands. “He died in Landmoor not long ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. It’s not easy losing those we care for. Tell me about him. That often helps a wound of the heart to heal. I’ll let this fellow sleep a while before waking him.”

“Eat something first.”

Exeres sighed and took a nibble from the trencher bowl. He didn’t eat meat, so he tore away from the trencher and sopped it up with gravy. “Thank you. Let’s move on to that one….no, he’s already dead…that one then. Nasty gash on his head. He might not ever wake up.” He set his chirurgery packet down near his knees and watched her move around to the other side.

“The blood doesn’t bother you?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I’ve seen more split skulls than I wish I had. Let me change his bandage.”

“That would help. Tell me about Flent. Now that’s a pretty easy name to remember.”

“I don’t think I can. I’m still…working through it. He was a Drugaen. Do you know about the Drugaen?”

Exeres nodded. “They’re men who were deformed centuries ago and live in the caves below the Ravenstone. Rather stunted in height, but I’ve heard their folk are strong enough to lift a horse.”

“If you told one they were stunted, you might have to try some healing art on yourself, Zerite. Some folks thought Flent was in love with me or something silly like that, but he was more like a little brother. Had a temper, of course. Loved his ale. But he was thoughtful and always there for me. Then Quickfellow came and everything about my life went to the winds. He’s the Shae I told you about—the one who healed Flent. We followed him here and then on to Landmoor to try and do something that would stop this banned war.” Shaking her head, she wrung the bloody rags and tossed them to the pile and then dipped her hands in the bucket again. “Losing Flent was like losing my hand or losing a piece of my soul. I don’t think…I don’t know that I’ll ever get over it. I don’t know where Quickfellow ended up. Avisahn maybe.”

“Quickfellow sounds like a proper Shae name to me.” Exeres studied the wounded scalp and wondered what he would be able to do about it. “My mother was a Shae, but I never knew her. My father was a Druid priest, and he taught me what I know about healing. I look at this man and wonder if he’ll wake up again. Part of the answer is whether he has anything here he wants to live for. I’ve seen people with small wounds snuff out like candles. I’ve seen knights who’ve lost their legs press on, fighting for life and winning.”

Her expression darkened again.

“What did I say wrong? All my comforting words are stinging.”

She wiped a tear from her eye. “It’s not you, Exeres. If you only knew what I’d been through the last few weeks. One of the friends we lost in Landmoor was a knight from Owen Draw. He died because of me.”

Exeres looked at her skeptically. "I don't mean to be rude, Ticastasy, but you don't look like you could kill a knight of Owen Draw. No offense."

A rueful grin shone through. "I didn't mean it that way. It's my fault that he died. If I'd acted quicker and unlocked them faster, then we might have made it out before Secrist came."

"You've completely lost me." He dabbed some of the juttleberry ointment on the wounded forehead and pressed a tobac leaf over it. "You come from Sol and knew a Drugaen. You met a Shae with some Silvan magic. And now a knight is involved somehow, and you think you caused his death. You've had a busy month."

The smirk turned into a flickering smile, like candle shavings struggling to hold onto a flame. The glow brightened and her smile lingered. "Thank you, Exeres. That was more helpful than a thousand sermons."

"Good, because I only know short sermons." He looked at her again, wishing he could not see the life draining out of her so rapidly. She had a tender heart. But he could never fall in love with a human. He already knew that. But what Shae girl would want a half-blood Druid priest? "How many more pallets are in this place? By Hate, we won't be done until dawn at the earliest." He gave her a wink and a smile.

"Thank you, Exeres."

He nodded and savored the compliment, moving on to the next man, who lay sleeping on his side. The suffering man had a head full of black choppy hair and his face was waxy and pale. He had taken a crossbow bolt in the thigh, shattering the bone. Exeres stared at the man, at his Life magic dwindling away so quickly. He would last a few years maybe, but the wound would plague him with a limp for the rest of his life. It would cause him years of suffering. Exeres bowed his head, laying his hand on the ruptured flesh. He inhaled the Earth magic into himself to give himself strength and then mixed some of his own Life magic into it, sending it out to fuse the bone back together. The man stiffened in pain and jerked awake.

"Hold him," Exeres told her, concentrating.

Ticastasy gripped the man's shoulders and helped force him back down on the pallet.

"It hurts! By the Druids, it hurts!"

"There," Exeres said, releasing him. His head spun and his stomach lurched with nausea. He looked at the man and saw the ebb of Life magic slow slightly. It almost didn't make sense healing a human. The lifespan was so short anyway.

The man edged up off the pallet and tested out his leg. "Thank you, Zerite. My name is Holm. You will always be welcome here. Thank you! Thank you!"

Exeres nodded and sat down on the now-vacant pallet. He looked for the tray of stew and saw Ticastasy already fetching it. He drank water for his thirst and nibbled more on the crust of the trencher.

"Tell me about your eye. Is it some rule of Forbiddance or something that you can't speak about?"

He chewed slowly, exhausted. After finishing the bite, he brushed off his hands and lifted the patch to show her. Most people were disgusted by what they saw, but she wasn't. Her face pinched a little and she cocked her head.

"I've never seen…it's a strange color," she said. "Like milk. How did it happen that way?"

"I can't explain it other than I was born with it. If you waved your hand over my right ear, I wouldn't see it but I would know it's there. So I'm not really blind in that eye, but it's easier just to call it blindness. I see Life magic with this eye. I can look at you or Allavin Devers and tell you about how much longer you have before you die." He looked down at his hands. "It isn't anything

that I wish I could do."

"Why do you wear the patch then?"

"I wear the patch because people don't like looking at me without it." He adjusted it back into place. "I believe it came from my mother's side. I wish I knew more of her, but my father never spoke of her. I don't even know her name. People have seen dogs with eyes of different colors. But they don't trust a man like that. Especially one with Shae blood."

"I've seen stranger things in Sol, Exeres. Inlanders are too superstitious. That's always bothered me about them. Not everyone in this world would look at you like an outcast. I don't."

"Thank you, Ticastamy."

She smiled. "Ticastasy."

He shook his head. "I'm horrible with names. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. How long did it take you to become a Zerite?"

Exeres felt something prickle down the back of his neck. Like a hand that reached out and tickled him with a feather. He scrunched up his shoulders, not liking that feeling of intrusion and imposed intimacy, and turned around. The main hall of the inn was thick with people, but he saw the man the others couldn't. He saw the Sleepwalker standing at the rear of the inn, his eyes focused on Exeres.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I'll be right back. I need to speak with someone."

* * *

Exeres stepped into the cool night air, inhaling the strong scent of smoke that hung over Castun like a shroud. The town had been crippled by the Kiran Thall. Most of the survivors had already begun fleeing north to seek shelter in Dos-Aralon. Exeres' work in Castun would be done in the next day or two. Then he knew he would have to go deeper into the Shadows Wood, to ease the suffering there.

The Sleepwalker's voice whispered through the smoky air.

"I've found you at last."

Exeres approached the Sleepwalker warily. The shadows were so thick on the back porch that his good eye could see nothing but the dark cloak and clothes, barely the flicker from a medallion hanging around his neck. But the Life magic ebbed from him so slowly, so faintly, like grains of sand lost once per moment. It would take ten thousand years for the Sleepwalker to die.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Jaerod, Exeres."

"How do you know who I am?"

"Because I've seen you before. In a Foretelling. You're late."

Exeres felt a twinge of fear speaking to the Sleepwalker, yet also a little thrill of excitement as well. There was something familiar about him. Memories from past dreams whispered to his soul. He had seen the Sleepwalker before, though he could not remember the details.

"I think…I think I have seen you as well, Jaerod. What do you want?"

"I have a message for you to deliver to someone at Landmoor. Will you take this message for me?"

Exeres shrugged. "I do not see why not, since I am already planning to go there. But I suppose you already knew that. Who is the message for?"

"The message is for the commander of the Shoreland regiment in the Bandit army. His name is Tsyrke Phollen. Can you remember that name, Exeres? It's rather important that you remember this one."

"Surk Fallen? I'll try. He's in Landmoor then? What is the message?"

"You will know when you deliver it."

"What?"

"You will know what to say when it is time to deliver it."

"I don't understand, Sleepwalker."

Jaerod smiled. "No, I don't think you do yet. But you will, Exeres. You will understand very soon. That's why you are the messenger. You are still blind in many ways. Be ready when your sight is restored."

"You've given me directions that I don't understand. Why be so cryptic?"

"Do you remember the man's name you're supposed to speak to?"

"Surk Fallen."

"When you meet him to deliver my message, you will understand. You'll just have to trust me."

"I don't even know you."

There was a pause, and the stillness of the evening thickened.

"Did that stop you from following me outside into the shadows?"

Exeres sighed and scraped his boot on the plank. "No. Is this message important?"

"The sooner you go, the sooner the dying stops."

"I'll leave tomorrow."

Jaerod reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "Be ready for it, Exeres. Some truths are very sharp. Be careful who you cut with them."

"More riddles? What is that supposed to mean, Sleepwalker?"

"Maybe you'll learn the answer in your dreams. Farewell, Zerite."

"My dreams? What do you know of my dreams? What can you tell…"

Exeres stood and clenched his fists, watching as the Sleepwalker wrapped himself in Earth magic and faded.

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